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THE FRESH OF FRISCO; or, THE HEIRESS OF BUENAVENTURA.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.



"HAIL, THAR, STRANGER!" HE CRIED. "LIGHT DOWN, AND PONT UP YOUR WEALTH!"

The Fresh of Frisco;

OR,

The Heiress of Buenaventura.

A Story of Southern California.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE NEW YORK 'SHARP'," "OVERLAND KIT," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROB," "KENTUCK, THE SPORT," "INJUN DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RISING OF THE VIGILANTES.

"BRING out the last prisoner," commanded "Judge Lynch," a tall, brawny, determined-looking miner, armed to the teeth.

For the first time in the history of Kern Bar, the Vigilantes had risen.

Kern Bar was a little mining camp on the headwaters of the Southern fork of the Kern river, in Southern California, just a mile or two from the main trail which led from Bakersfield through the Tah-e-chay-pah pass to Mohave city and the principal settlements on the Colorado river.

We write of the days of 1850, only a short time after the close of the Mexican war and the disbandment of the forces of the victorious North American Republic, which in so short a time had vanquished Mexico.

Kern Bar was a prosperous little mining camp, mustering about a hundred souls all told, men and boys, every one of them—not one of the weaker sex in the district.

And as the festering carcass of the dead buffalo upon the great sandy desert attracts from afar the snarling, sneaking wolf, and the carrion-loving vulture, so does the scent of gold attract the human birds of prey.

And then, all of a sudden, the miners of the Bar rose up in their might, and with the first gray light of the morning, one day, without warning, the Vigilantes laid violent hands upon the evil-doers who bid fair to make the name of Kern Bar a byword and a reproach.

The wretches who resembled the vultures fled; those who aped the wolf showed their teeth and offered resistance; but the awakened wrath of the Vigilantes, rising in righteous indignation, is like the avalanche of ice that hurtles down the mountain-side, crushing all resistance.

There was a brief and bloody fight; ten men went down weltering in their blood, three of them of the law-and-order crowd—the other seven, desperate desperadoes.

Five of the seven were killed outright; the other two were mortally wounded.

And then, so savage was public sentiment, ropes were put around the necks of all, both dead and dying, and without prayer or shrift they were rudely strung up to the branches of a little clump of scrubby oaks on the outskirts of the town. The rest of the gang, five all told, had thrown down their arms and begged for mercy, terrified by the fate of their companions. They were put into a convenient cabin, and a court at once convened to try them; and so, just as the morning sun rose grandly above the peaks of the Sierra Nevada, and the dark pines which lined the sides of the mountain chain began to cast their shadows on the Western foot-hills, the trial began.

Speedy indeed was the course of justice; no special pleas, no legal quibbles availed aught here in this wild free court. The learned men who have written of the "law's delay," evidently were ignorant of, and referred not to, Judge Lynch's court.

The name of the prisoner was called out. "Make your charges!" the judge exclaimed, and there were accusers enough, for in a little community like Kern Bar, if a man was a rascal it was pretty well known.

All the accused got off lightly, for "gambler" or "drunken vagabond" was the extent of the offenses.

"Three hours to get out of town!" was the judge's stern sentence, and each man promised solemnly that three hours would see him "shut" of Kern Bar, never to return.

One by one they slunk away, and then came the judge's command, with which our story begins.

The door of the cabin was opened and a well-built, imposing-looking fellow stepped forth—a man standing about five feet eight inches, weighing about a hundred and fifty pounds, all bone and muscle, too, without an ounce of useless fat; well-formed, well-proportioned, as graceful as a dancing-master, as muscular as a bullwhacker, and as handsome as a young Apollo. As fine a head sat on the shapely neck, supported by the broad shoulders, as ever a sculptor craved for a model; a rather boyish face, strangely white, with its smooth surface, hardly marked by one of time's deep lines, and yet the firm-set, resolute mouth, the massive chin, and the cold, clear gray eyes, as deep in their depths as the fathomless waves of a bottomless ocean, plainly revealed that though the man's face might be a boyish one, fringed, girlish-like, by crispy curls of golden hair, yet the owner of the face was one of iron will and undaunted energy.

He was dressed semi-Mexican fashion in complete black, but instead of the small jacket belonging to that costume he wore a velvet coat; his linen was spotless—the only biled shirt that Kern Bar could boast, and on his head he sported the broad-brimmed stiff sombrero common to the Californian herdsmen, rather an unusual head-gear this for an American, which the man evidently was.

As he stepped into the circle before Judge Lynch, who was mounted upon a dry-goods box, there was a dead silence, and all surveyed him with eager curiosity.

He was a stranger to Kern Bar. "What's the charge against this man?" quoth the judge.

No one answered. There was a moment's silence, and then the stranger took off his hat and bowed to the crowd.

"Much obliged, gentlemen, that there isn't one of you who 'savvy's' me," he said, in a deep-toned, musical voice. "I reckoned all the time that it was

a mistake, and now, judge, I've no objection to take a drink with you and we'll call the matter square."

Judge Lynch frowned; there was a coolness and assurance about the man that was not pleasing to him.

"Why was this man arrested?" he cried. "We found him in the 'City of the Angels Saloon' a-playin' cards with the rest of the gang and went for him on suspicion," one of the miners replied.

"Quite correct," and the stranger bowed politely to the miner, "and didn't I come with you as quiet as a lamb, although I'm 'heeled' good enough for any dozen men in this crowd?" and holding up the skirts of his coat he showed two silver-mounted revolvers securely fastened in secret pockets. The miners had never thought of searching a man's coat-flaps for weapons.

"Your name?" demanded the judge. "What business is that of yours?" was the cool rejoinder.

"Answer or you'll find out!" thundered the judge, enraged.

"I'll bet you two to one in ponies that I won't," was the deliberate reply. "Don't get riled, judge; I've done nothing in this hyer town to deserve punishment, whatever I may have done elsewhere."

"I know him!" cried one of the bystanders, suddenly. "I thought that it was him—Blake!"

"Right you are, my honored friend!" ejaculated the man, still cold and calm, although there was a slight shade now on his face.

"What Blake?" the judge asked.

"J ck Blake!"

And then three or four cried out in a sort of chorus:

"The Fresh of Frisco!"

"Right again, my gentle friends!" exclaimed the stranger, a bit of defiance in his tone now. "Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, as some of my friends have seen fit to term me. Gambler, black-leg, card-sharp, desperado, road-agent, mail-robber, murderer, horse-thief, everything that's bad; but, that's no business of yours; I've done nothing to offend any one in this camp."

"Oh, I've heard of you," Judge Lynch observed, and there was a visible degree of respect in his voice and manner as he spoke, surveying the man curiously the while. "They say you've killed more men than you've got fingers and toes."

"They say a good many things in this world, judge, besides their prayers; but, one thing they can't say of me, and that is that mortal man ever saw my back when I was dared to hold my own in a quarrel, or that I ever took an unfair advantage of either friend or enemy. Why, I could have wiped out eight or ten of you this morning when this little difficulty began, but I hadn't been introduced to the town and I thought it would be rude."

"One hour to leave hyer," said the judge, coldly.

"But, judge, I haven't tread on the toes of a mortal man since I've been in the camp!" Blake expostulated.

"No matter; we don't want you here; we know you by reputation; you've been warned out of every mining camp between this and the Golden Gate; you're too 'fresh,' so be off!"

"Bring me my mule and I'll git. I'm too well-bred to stay if my company ain't agreeable, although I reckon the Bar would be none the worse off if I remained, for I'd made up my mind to drop my old life and lead a new one; but since honest men won't have me among them, why then I'll try how the outlaws of the Sierra Nevada will like my company."

"One hour to leave town," repeated the judge.

"If this animal don't buck!" cried Blake, springing upon the mule's back, which one of the miners had brought, "I'll be outside of your old camp in five minutes. I say, judge, can't you give me a letter of recommendation to the next town?" And then amid a general smile he rode away, but with the bitterness of death in his heart.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECRET TREASURE OF BUENAVENTURA.

A DANGEROUS and uncertain shore is the coast-line of Southern California; clear from the Golden Gate down to San Diego, either ragged, rocky reefs or shifting, uncertain sand-bars render navigation difficult.

The coast-line runs almost directly south until it reaches the projecting tongue of land known as Point Conception; then it bends to the east almost at right-angles for fifty or sixty miles, and then trends again to the south.

At Point Conception the sea passage known as the channel of Santa Barbara begins—the group of islands called Santa Barbara, from whence the channel takes its name, guarding the passage from the fury of the south-westerly gales.

At high noon of a certain bright May day in the year 1850 a small, sloop-rigged craft rounded Point Conception and began to beat up Santa Barbara channel, for the land breeze was blowing the most unfavorable wind that the craft could have had.

The sloop might be reckoned at some thirty or forty tons measurement—a rather ugly-built craft, something on the Dutch lugger order, but carrying an immense spread of canvas for its size, and evidently capable, despite its awkward appearance, of much better speed than one would have imagined.

She was a coasting craft, apparently, one that traded along the shore with the various hamlets that dot the line of the coast.

The crew was extremely small, two men only; one, a tall, well-built fellow with a sandy beard and long sandy hair brushed carelessly back behind his ears—a man of thirty-five or forty, with a shrewd face and rather a pleasant air. The other was a common, sailor-like chap.

There was a third person aboard the sloop, evidently a passenger—a woman—a young and beautiful girl, dark-haired, dark-eyed, tall and stately: a very Diana in the perfectness of her physical charms.

She was reclining upon a coil of ropes near the tiller, her eyes fixed with a longing expression upon the blue line of the distant shore.

The captain of the craft was at the helm. "You look sad, miss," he observed, suddenly, and with a broad Scotch accent perceptible now and then. He had been covertly watching the face of the girl some time.

"A strange presentiment of danger fills my mind," she replied. "I have a dread that on yonder shore instead of a welcome I shall find a grave."

The skipper was a little given to superstition. What Scotchman is there who does not yield some little credence to the tales of second-sight or premonition so common to the land o' cakes?

"Oh, you mustn't think that way, miss," he observed, reassuringly. "It's a bonny fortune that you are going to, and it's your grandfather's ain man that's waiting for you on the shore. You'll be the lady of Buenaventura, as your grandfather was the lord."

"But this merchant—this Stuart McKerr: who and what is he?"

"A close-fisted old fellow," the sailor replied, "and, to tell the truth, I never thought much of him; but as far as you are concerned, miss, he has acted all right. He was your grandfather's agent, a long time ago. Your grandfather, miss, was a very king in the old time, and had more diamonds and gold than any landed proprietor from San Francisco to Los Angeles. In 1846, when the war broke out between Mexico and the United States—this was all Mexican territory then—the Americans, with a cavalry force, pushed through the desert and occupied this coast. Dreading the pillage of the soldiers, your grandfather collected all his jewels and gold together and fled with a few trusty servants to the mountains, and there, in a secure spot, he 'cached' his treasures and all his private papers, and hardly had he accomplished this task when he was taken suddenly ill and died. Your grandfather always called himself Michael Buenaventura, and no one had any idea what his real name was until recently. His property has been in the hands of the lawyers ever since, for a multitude of false heirs sprung up at once, and it was only lately, and in some mysterious way, that Mr. McKerr discovered that the old cattle king's right name was Scott, and that he had a married son living in New York. I was dispatched to learn the truth, and, as you know, found that your father, old Scott's son, was dead, and that you were the only remaining heir. I wrote all the particulars to Mr. McKerr and he answered, directing me to bring you on. Through the same mysterious source, by means of which he learned that your father was old Scott's son, he also discovered a clew to the hidden treasures 'cached' in the mountains, which have for so many years been buried from the world. He instructed me to bring you to San Francisco, and then by water in this little craft of mine to Santa Barbara. You have a dangerous rival, miss, in your claim to your grandfather's estates—a man called Alexander Black, who is an alcalde of a small mining village on the Mohave river, known as Tejon Camp. This Black used to be your grandfather's overseer, and so afraid is Mr. McKerr of him, for he is a dark and unscrupulous man—one who, if report speaks true, would not hesitate to stoop to any crime to serve his purpose—that I do not intend to land at Buenaventura, where Mr. McKerr lives, but I am to put in here at Santa Barbara, and in order that your enemies shall not even know that you are in the country, I shall not run in until after dark, and then not into the regular harbor, but into a little cove just around the point to the north. Mr. McKerr is to light a beacon-fire near the cove as a guide for me to steer by. So cheer up, lady; friends wait for you. Mr. McKerr will aid you to the extent of his power, for he thinks that you will win the estates now, beyond a doubt, and of course he wants to be on the winning side."

"What sort of a man is this Mr. Black?" she asked. "A great, red-bearded fellow, almost a giant in stature, and as strong as an ox; a man with a terrible temper, and reports do say that the town over which he rules as alcalde is little better than a nest of cutthroats."

"A dreadful opponent, indeed, for a poor orphan girl like myself to contend with, and so, like a Mexican girl, I must pray to my namesake, good Saint Barbara, to aid me in this unequal fight," the girl said, smilingly, and with a look upon her face that clearly belied her words. In truth, this gentle, carefully-nurtured girl had a will of iron and a courage as dauntless as ever dwelt within the breast of womankind. No weak, weeping child was she to tremble at the approach of danger, but, on the contrary, her spirits rose to meet the occasion.

"I am the granddaughter of old Michael Scott, the cattle-king of Buenaventura, his only true heir; all that he has left is mine. I have a clew, also, to the hidden treasures 'cached' in the mountains, and I defy all the world to deprive me of my rights!"

Thus had she spoken to herself, a dozen times at least since the sloop of the smuggler-adventurer, Sandy McAlpine, had sailed through the Golden Gate and borne this female Jason southward in her quest for the golden fleece.

And yet, at times, despite her iron will and her dauntless courage, over her soul crept a dark foreboding of hidden danger lurking in the near future, and with that strange instinct, so common to woman, so inexplicable to man, she felt that the Scotch-Mexican banker, this Stuart McKerr, who had gone to all the trouble of hunting her up in the great city of the far East, and whose money was bringing her to the scene of contest, so that she might be able to make a fight for her rights, was no friend to her, but rather a bitter, terrible enemy.

As we have said, there was no reason for this suspicion; all the circumstances were against it, and yet, so powerful was it that it pervaded all her being, despite her efforts to shake it off.

"He is your enemy; he will work you harm; no friend waits for you upon this unknown shore; when you land you fall at once into the clutches of men who will not scruple even to strike at your life to remove you from their path!" Thus said a secret, low, mysterious voice, whispering ever in her ears.

"And if prayers to the fair saint who has given her name to this channel are heeded, why, then, I ought to invoke her assistance to help me to a safe landing to-night, for there will be no moon, and if the night happens to be a thick one, as is only common at this time of the year, I may have a ticklish job to make the cove, for there's an ugly sunken ship on a bar just off the point which has broken the bones of many a stout craft," McAlpine remarked.

"What time will we make the harbor?" "Not before ten, unless the breeze freshens more than I think it will."

The girl relapsed into a dreamy silence, her gaze fixed upon the blue and distant land.

What held the future for her—an easy triumph and quick possession of the hidden treasures of Buenaventura, or a dark, damp grave in this unknown land?

The sailor-adventurer—bold, reckless Sandy McAlpine—watched her covertly, she all unconscious of the scrutiny. Many a beautiful girl had he seen in his time, but none to compare with this peerless maiden, and in his heart of hearts he vowed that he would be her friend, no matter how powerful her enemies.

CHAPTER III.

THE ALCALDE OF TEJON CAMP.

THE night came on dark and gloomy. As the sailor had predicted there was no moon, and great inky clouds covered the face of the sky.

The restless surges of old ocean beat with a resistless force upon the sandy shore, and the breakers were so high and fierce that it seemed almost impossible for a boat to live in them.

As the sun sunk slowly to his couch that evening in the unquiet waves of the far Pacific a man in the dim twilight, mounted upon a spotted mustang, had ridden from the town of Santa Barbara, and, following the trend of the coast, proceeded northward. He had cut across the little point of land which juts out into the sea to the north of the town, skirted along the shores of the cove-like indentation beyond the point, and then halting upon the little tongue of land just beyond the cove, looked around him.

A man of peculiarly striking appearance was the horseman.

He was well on in years; a great, gaunt person in stature, with a massive head and strongly marked features. His hair was iron gray and cropped quite short; his beard, iron gray like the hair, descended from the chin and rested upon his breast like the tawny mane of a lion. He was well—richly dressed, and, as was common to the dwellers of lower California, at the time of which we write, when traveling abroad, well armed.

This man was the merchant banker of Buenaventura, Stuart McKerr.

Behind him on the saddle a bundle was strapped, and now, as he halted and cast an anxious, sweeping glance seaward, from the bundle he drew a powerful marine glass, and applying it to his eye carefully surveyed the vast expanse of water before him.

The sun had vanished from view and the night was coming rapidly on, but there was still light enough to serve his purpose, and he soon discovered, by the aid of his fine glass, the white sail—small almost apparently as the wing of a gull—of a little craft beating up the channel.

"Tis the Santa Maria!" he murmured. By this high-sounding appellation the sloop of Sandy McAlpine was known. "The fellow calculated shrewdly; he will be in by night, but if the wind keeps on freshening it will be a brave boat to ride this surf, and the boat that comes from yonder craft to-night carries the heiress of Buenaventura and her fortunes."

The eyes of the speaker sparkled strangely and a dark and gloomy look came over his hard features. "And now, where is my man?" he murmured, dismounting from his steed, hopping it with his lariat so that it could not stray far away, and glancing carefully around him.

Then, from a cluster of bushes, some twenty paces distant, rose the figure of a tall and brawny man—a huge, gaunt, red-bearded fellow, whose dress was a strange mixture of the herdsman and the miner. Armed to the teeth was he, and from his looks one would have quickly concluded that he would not scruple to use his weapons to back his game.

It was a strange meeting, in the gloom of the evening, between these two men, so like and yet so unlike each other.

The man from the bushes cast a rapid glance around him as if he apprehended danger, and then, as if satisfied that the horseman was alone, advanced to meet him.

"You are Alexander Black, alcalde of Tejon Camp, I take it," the horseman said.

"And you are Stuart McKerr, banker and merchant of Buenaventura," the other replied.

"Yes, the man who has stepped forward to fight you on behalf of the orphan girl, Barbara, for the hidden treasure of old Michael Scott."

"By all the fiends below! but you'll find that you have taken no easy task upon yourself!" cried the alcalde, coarsely, and he glared at the other with a menacing look.

The banker laughed a hard and ringing laugh, which displayed his white, wolf-like teeth.

"Oh, ho!" he cried, "do you threaten me with the wrath of your cutthroats of the Tejon Camp at once? You and I, Alexander Black, have done much business together in the last ten years, and yet this is the first time that we have ever stood face to face."

"It is strange that we have never met, considering that you were old Scott's right-hand man in the town, and I his second self in the mountains," the other remarked.

"I saw you yesterday, for the first time, in the streets of Santa Barbara; you were pointed out to me as the man who was determined to obtain the treasures of Buenaventura."

"Why did you send for this girl?" demanded Black, abruptly. "I would have made a better bargain with you."

"Perhaps."

"It is not too late; she has not arrived yet."

"She is yonder," and the speaker pointed seaward. "Sandy McAlpine is bringing her in his craft."

"The meddling fool!" cried the alcalde, hoarsely, "his blood will be at my door yet!"

"I am here to-night to light a beacon to guide him in."

"You are not wise to tell me this!" the other exclaimed, ominously; "you tempt me to do you a mischief," and this worthy, who was much more of an outlaw than a magistrate, put his hand meaningly upon the butt of one of his revolvers.

"And you have really no chance at all against this girl," McKerr went on, unconcernedly. "She is her grandfather's heir beyond the shadow of a doubt; nay, more—in her bosom she carries a sealed packet addressed to her father by her grandfather's own

hand, and in that packet is a map of the mountain region where the hidden treasures of Buenaventura lie cached."

"She must wade in blood before she gains that treasure!" the mountain-man cried, ferociously.

"As full of passion as ever, eh, Donald MacDonald?"

The alcalde gasped in amazement.

"As full of hot blood," the other continued, "as on the day when, on the Scottish hillside, ye struck down your rival, Geordie Buchan, and killed him on the spot, and that crime made ye a wanderer forever from your native land."

"In God's name, who are you that know this?" the bloody-handed man exclaimed.

"Your ain brother, Angus MacDonald, your elder by seven years, who left home long ago to seek his fortune in a foreign land."

The two grasped hands, warmly.

"But your name, man; why have ye changed it?"

"I have my reasons; ask me no questions and I'll tell ye no lies; but now to business. I recognized you yesterday, and that is why I summoned you here to-night. We must work together and not against each other. The wealth of old Michael Scott—the hidden treasures of Buenaventura—are for us and not for this young lassie. She is to land to-night. Sandy McAlpine brings her in his craft. He is a shrewd rogue, and he knows a secret or two of mine that he should not know. This is a dangerous and uncertain coast; I am to light a torch to guide him in. The torch is to be displayed on yonder point," and he waved his hand to the eastward where the long point projected into the water. "He will steer so as to keep that light upon his right hand, and that course will bring him safely into the cove."

"Aha! but you will not display the light upon that point!" the alcalde exclaimed, jumping at once in thought to the scheme of the other.

"No, the light will be displayed here. In the darkness he will sail straight in, fearing no danger. A mile out, at low water the billows play over a sunken ship on a sand-bar; at high tide there is a scant two feet of water above the timbers of the wreck. The Santa Maria, running straight in, decoyed by my false light, will break her bones upon the obstruction, and it will be a stout swimmer indeed that will make the shore alive from that sand-bar to-night."

"And should the waves prove more kind than we, and cast her up, a single shot will end the matter," suggested the alcalde, again tapping the butt of one of his revolvers.

By this time almost total darkness had come, and the only evidence of the close proximity of the sea was the hoarse roar of the surf breaking with terrible force upon the rocky beach.

"It is too early yet to light the torch; let us sit down and wait," suggested the elder brother.

The two sat down side by side, and peered out into the darkness of the night.

Suddenly the features of the alcalde began to work, and a low moan came from his lips; his body writhed in strange convulsions.

"The spell—the spell is on me—do not speak!" he cried, hoarsely, and evidently under the influence of terrible excitement. He threw himself at full length upon the earth and pulled his blanket over his head.

Struck with awe, despite his iron nature, the elder brother remained as motionless as a statue.

A good half-hour the alcalde lay prone upon the earth, and the superstition of the other told him that his brother was holding communion with the spirits of the other world, for Donald MacDonald was the seventh son of a seventh son—his father the seventh son of a seventh son, and the gift of "second sight," by means of which the dim and misty future was made plain, was the acknowledged portion of these seventh sons of seventh sons. It came upon him, this terrible spell, unawares; he could not invoke it, could not resist it; but when it came, to submit and pass into the condition of "trance" was a matter of course.

"It is time to light the torch," McKerr said, at last, and rising, he prepared the beacon light, fixed it firmly in the ground, applied the match, and the flickering flame springing at once into being, burnt a hole in the mantle of the inky night.

The alcalde sat upright, pale and wan.

"Well, what saw ye?" the other questioned, anxiously; "will we succeed?"

"I canna' tell," the alcalde replied; "it was a dim and uncertain vision. One figure only saw I clearly."

"The girl?"

"No, a man, and that man destined to be our deadly foe."

"Sandy McAlpine?"

"Nay, a stranger—an American, dressed all in black, and yet like a Mexican, somewhat, with a strange, white face, and he bore a pack of cards in his hands, and ever and anon he held up to me the jack of spades in warning, and spades signify a grave."

"There is no such man in this district, to my knowledge," observed McKerr, thoughtfully.

"He was a stranger, and he came from the northern passes, for he brought the chill air of the mountains with him, and he seemed, too, to be enveloped in the red smoke of battle."

"And he threatened you?"

"Yes, and laughed when he threatened, and his smile was like ice."

"How know you that he was connected with the girl?"

"Because, when I first saw him he bore a senseless female in his arms, all dripping wet, as though she had just been plucked from the waves."

"We'll go on, though?" McKerr said, in a tone of question.

"Yes, although I was sure that hell itself was gaping open to receive us!" the alcalde replied.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOLVES OF TEJON.

THE Tejon Pass is the gate by means of which entrance is gained from the upper valleys to the fertile plains of the San Barbara district, but at the time of which we write the pass was haunted by a band of brigandly road-agents, who unscrupulously levied "toll" on all who dared to come that way.

The broken, rugged country lying adjacent to the pass afforded the outlaws safe harborage, and from

their lairs in the mountains they sallied forth to plunder the inhabitants of the fertile plains below.

Nearly all the landed proprietors were stock-raisers, and the outlaws swooping down upon the herds of fat bees would drive them off, and then, through their confederates in the upper valleys, easily dispose of them.

At the time of which we write these landed proprietors were nearly all Californians or Mexicans, and as the "Wolves of Tejon," as the brigands delighted to term themselves, were mostly Americans or men of English-speaking nations, naturally they regarded the cattle-raisers as mortal enemies, and thought it no wrong to despoil them of their wealth.

Few of the inhabitants then, of the lower plains, cared to attempt the passage of the Tejon Pass unless in company with a well-armed force.

Seldom was it therefore that a single man rode alone through the pass.

And yet, as the sun was sinking to its bed, and the evening twilight was drawing on apace, the white-faced man, who had been hunted like a wild beast, and driven out from the mining-town of Kern Bar, rode into the gloomy, rocky defile.

Little knew the man, the Fresh of Frisco, as he was so oddly termed, of the danger that awaited the solitary traveler in that lonely mountain trail.

Like the Wandering Jew of the old-time story, a curse seemed upon him. The miner had spoken truly when he had said that every mining-camp and every stock-ranch from San Francisco to Bakersfield had repudiated him. He was an outcast, and yet no worse, if no better, than the rest of the wandering fraternity to whom he belonged, the men who claimed the fickle goddess, Fortune, for a protector, and who often risked not only gold but life itself upon the turn of a card.

The North had driven him forth, through the passes of the Sierra Nevada; he would descend upon the fertile plains of the South and try if fate would deal more kindly with him.

Mounted upon a shaggy-hided gray mule, a rough, vicious-looking animal, but a beast that, like a singed cat, was much better than he looked, for he was untiring in limb, could keep fat upon nothing, and was as sure-footed as a mountain goat, the outcast rode fearlessly into the dark and gloomy defile.

And then, suddenly, a huge-bearded, muscular fellow, armed to the teeth, stepped out from behind a rock and leveled a pistol at the rider.

"Halt thar, stranger!" he cried. "Light down, and pony up your wealth!"

The rider checked his mule and, seemingly in no-wise cowed by the hostile demonstration, burst into a loud and ringing laugh.

"Oh, ho, ho!" he cried, "this is the richest joke of the season! How much will you take, my bold buccaneer, for all the wealth that you will get out of me?"

"See hyer, you're entirely too smart!" growled the outlaw, annoyed by the manner of the other. "And I don't want no talk out of you! Jest you tumble off that mule and turn out your pockets, not forgetting your money-belt, or I'll let daylight right through you!"

"Supposing there isn't anything in my pockets; supposing that I don't own any such thing as a money-belt, what then?" the rider queried, coolly.

"You talk too much, and do you know I've half a mind to plug you, any way, 'cos you're so sassy?" cried the robber, savagely. "Do you know who I am?"

"I 'pass' on that!"

"I'm one of the Wolves of Tejon!"

"One of the bears, more likely," the rider retorted.

"And we Wolves own this pass, we do; and nary man, white or yellow, red or black, goes through this hyer pass without paying toll, do ye mind?"

"And when a pilgrim is dead broke and can't 'ante' up, what then?"

"Why, then we strip him to his hide and let him go."

"And you intend to strip me?"

"That's the 'lead' I'm on, so 'light or else I'll fit ye for a hole in the ground inside of two minutes!"

And then, as if affrighted by the threat, the rider bent forward in the saddle and clutched the mane of the mule as if intending to spring to the ground.

Deceived by the movement, the outlaw dropped the muzzle of his weapon; but, suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, the rider sat bolt upright again in the saddle, a revolver clutched in his hand and the shining tube leveled directly at the breast of the stranger.

Never was there a man taken more completely at a disadvantage.

"And now, my gentle friend, your scalp is mine unless you throw down your arms and beg for mercy!" the adventurer cried, "covering" the outlaw with a deadly aim.

But not alone with a single man had the outcast to contend, for in a second, half a dozen well-armed ruffians rose from their coverts in the bushes, before, behind, and on either hand, and a single, well-directed shot pierced the heart of the mule; the beast fell lifeless, but the rider skillfully disengaged himself as the mule fell and lighted on his feet.

The Fresh of Frisco had fallen into a trap. Like the prairie wolves, from whom these outlaws had borrowed a name, they never hunted singly, but always in a pack.

"Throw down your weapons, or we'll murder you in cold blood!" one of the gang shouted.

"Let me go free or this man dies!" the adventurer replied; for he still kept the first outlaw "covered."

"Go for him, boys!" cried the first ruffian, who was evidently the leader of the gang.

The command was answered by the short, quick bark of a revolver.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOLVES MEET A MASTER.

THE revolver-shot was followed by a cry of agony from a wounded man. The burly ruffians who had so unceremoniously disputed the stranger's passage through the Tejon Pass was down, flat on his face, with a bullet through his brain; thus abruptly had his account with this world been closed.

A daring act for one man, alone, single-handed, to brave the anger of these rough Wolves of Tejon, whose boast it was that they waded in blood and

held their lives as lightly as though life was a simple boon to be had for the asking. But for the first time since they had commenced their wild career—since they had set themselves up as lords of the rocky, desolate mountain range through which the pass ran, these savage, reckless men encountered a foe as savage, when his blood was up, and as reckless, in the face of danger, as any one of their ruffianly band. Their master he was, too, in the use of the revolver, as he quickly proved, for hardly had his quick, unerring aim sent the leaden ball straight to the brain of the giant ruffian, than, suddenly wheeling, apparently without taking aim at all, he dropped another outlaw with a snap-shot!

His weapon was a self-cocker; a single pull at the trigger, both raised the hammer and released it. A third shot followed the second and another man was down; a fourth and the nearest fellow on the other side suffered. Five shots the pale-faced sharp-shooter had fired, and each bullet had reached its billet, before the amazed outlaws made a reply in kind, and then, their nerves unstrung by the murderous effects of the stranger's attack, their aim was wild, their bullets flew wide of the mark, and when their foeman plucked forth another revolver—another silver-plated, toy-like weapon—the courage was not in them to longer tarry and wage battle.

Incontinently they fled, until they got beyond revolver-range, and then, like sulky, half-tamed wild beasts, who had provoked the master's whip, longed to rend and tear, yet dared not, they stood, grouped together, an amazed, angry lot of outlaws.

Seven men had essayed to stop the stranger's way; four of them had fallen in the attempt, each and every man shot in exactly the same place, in the center of the forehead, just above the line of the eyes.

Was it a wonder, then, that the remaining three, clustered together, pistols in hand, were rather uncertain in regard to what their next move should be?

Three to one were they, and yet they hesitated. If the stranger had held his own against seven, what could three hope to do? and yet, it was a disgraceful shame that they, the bloody Wolves of Tejon, should suffer a single man to force his way through their chosen battle-ground.

Bold and reckless men were they, too—these survivors of the brief but bloody fight, the best of the band.

Black Jim Placer, a tall, swarthy-faced fellow, a giant in size, with long black hair and a flowing beard; Colonel Bill, a yellow-bearded, broad-shouldered worthy, with his mild blue eyes, looked much more like the head of some stock-farm than the outlaw that he was; Spanish Pete, and every inch he looked the name—tall, swarthy, with the air of a prince and the stride of an emperor, for many a broad acre and fat beeve this Californian Spaniard had owned in the fair southern plains bordering on the Pacific before the wine-cup, the gaming-table and the cunning wiles of fair but treacherous women had made ducks and drakes of his once ample fortune.

Three as bold men, as ready with their weapons and careless of their lives, as any one could find in all the great, rock-ribbed Golden State.

But, bold and reckless as they were they hesitated to attack the single man who, within the compass of a single minute, had worked the Wolves of Tejon more harm than all the sheriffs and police officials, backed by the armed and enraged herdsmen, who had suffered from the outlaws' depredations, had been able to do since the band was formed.

Four men had he slain, and all that the Wolves had to show in return was one dead mule.

Noticing the hesitation of the outlaws, Jack Blake prepared for action. To the butt of each revolver a small ring was attached; to the ring a loop of strong silk cord; so that, by passing his hand through the loop, the revolver was suspended from the wrist ready for action in a second and yet the wearer had free use of his hands.

Passing his hand through the loop of the unused revolver, he proceeded to recharge the other, and the outlaws looked on in sullen amazement.

"Let's make another dash at him!" Black Jim Placer exclaimed. "Why, we're three to one, and if we close in quick on him he won't stand no show!"

Spanish Pete shook his head.

"Why rush to certain death? It is not wise; this man is a devil; surely no mortal ever used a weapon as he used his. We were seven—we are three now."

"Bed-rock sense, every time!" Colonel Bill cried, with an approving nod. "I move that we adjourn and let this pilgrim go to blazes; anyway, for my part, I don't want none of this funeral-to-day; I ain't banking for it."

"But to retreat from one man," growled Black Jim.

"If he 'salivates' us as badly as he has the rest we won't retreat," the colonel observed, jocosely; "we'll stay right whar we are and no mistake."

"By blazes! I never turned my back on a single foe yet!" Jim exclaimed, with an angry shake of his massive head.

"Don't you do it, Jim; go in and wipe him out!" the colonel urged.

"Will you two back me?"

"Nary back for me," the colonel replied, tersely. "But I'll tell you what I'll do; 'I'll stay here and see the fun, and help to 'plant' you decently after he fixes you!"

"And you, Pete?" growled the angry ruffian, "what do you say?"

The Californian shook his head in a very decided manner.

"My time has not yet come, and I am in no hurry to rush into the other world."

Just at this moment Blake finished the recharging of his weapon, and immediately addressed the hesitating outlaws.

"Come, gentlemen, I'm waiting on you!" he cried, his bold voice ringing out clear on the breezy mountain air; "and in the first place I want to know who is going to pay for this mule? as good a beast as I ever backed, and he cost me fifty yellow boys in Bakersfield, only a week ago. Now, then, who pays? That's the question before the meeting!"

The cool tones, the brisk, business-like air and the whole-bearing of the man were really astonishing, and the amazed and baffled brigands were at a loss for a reply.

"Come, come, gentlemen; give me an answer. Who's responsible, eh?" and as he spoke Blake advanced a step, and this simple movement acted upon the outlaws like magic.

As nimbly as squirrels they skipped away and flattened themselves down behind the giant boulders that cropped out of the rocky surface of the pass, so that only the tops of their heads were visible.

Blake burst into a loud laugh.

"What! three to one, and you hide behind rocks!" he cried, in contempt. "And you call yourselves the Wolves of Tejon, eh? Go 'long with you! The Jack-rabbits of Tejon would be a better name, and decidedly more appropriate."

"Say! Who the devil are you, anyway?" asked the colonel, dextrously elevating his eyes above the edge of the boulder behind which he had found refuge, and ready to dodge at the slightest sign of hostile action upon the part of the foe.

"My name is Jackson Blake!"

"The Fresh of Frisco!" exclaimed the colonel, rising in his amazement and exposing the upper part of his body above the rock, when Blake, more in sport than in anger, leveled his revolver at him, but the outlaw threw up his hands in entreaty at once.

"Hol' on! It's all a mistake! Don't shoot! Like Captain Scott's 'coon, I come down! Why, we're pardas, we are! Why, Blake, you would have been welcome to the best that we've got if we had only know'd who you was; dog don't eat dog, you know."

"You know me, then?"

"By name, yes; I reckon that thar's few sports from here to Oregon but what has heered on you."

"Oh, how an evil reputation travels!" Blake muttered to himself, a shade on his handsome face.

"Well, if you know me, so much the better; you're the very man I want to see. Honest men have driven me forth and now I've come to join you Wolves of Tejon. Where's your captain?"

"Roasting in blazes about this time, I reckon," the colonel replied, coolly, "for he was the chap you settled at the first clip."

"So much the better, then, for I'll be your captain."

"You, eh?" cried the outlaws in a breath, amazed.

"Yes, do you want a better one? So far in this world every man's hand has been against me, and now I propose to return some of the blows which I have received. Come, is it a bargain?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE BREAKING ROCKS.

EARNESTLY the two conspirators who had plotted so deeply together against the orphan heiress waited for the culmination of their scheme.

The night was extremely dark and the wind increased in power as the night wore on. The signal light blazed fitfully, struggling with the wild spirits of the wind who seemed determined to extinguish it.

"Who and what is this Sandy McAlpine?" quoth the alcalde of Tejon Camp, abruptly. "I know but little of him except that he has crossed my path two or three times."

"He's a cunning rogue for whom the law has reached several times, but he has always been shrewd or lucky enough to keep out of its clutches. He is the master and owner of a small sloop which he calls the Santa Maria; he pretends to be an honest trader, up and down the coast, but in reality he is as bold a smuggler as ever defied the law. Many a rich cargo he has run in on the Mexican coast, right under the noses of the custom-house officials, and men do say, with their knowledge and aid, for these Mexican officials are nearly all arrant scoundrels. One thing about McAlpine is that he is a man of his word, and will stick like wax to a bargain; that is the reason why I chose him as my agent to find the girl. I agreed to pay him a certain sum for the service, and, also, if I was successful in finding, through the girl's aid, the hidden treasure, to give him a quarter of my profits in the affair."

"Under the circumstances, then, the quicker Sandy McAlpine goes to Davy Jones's locker, the better," the alcalde suggested, with a smile.

"Yes; he must certainly die," the other replied, coolly, "for if he escapes the wreck he is just the kind of man to make trouble."

"Oh, but he will not escape!" the alcalde exclaimed, "for if the waves and the rocks spare him we certainly will not."

"How in the fiend's name will we know when the sloop goes on the bar in his darkness?" the banker asked, endeavoring to peer through the inky darkness of the night over the gray line of the breaking surf roaring in at the foot of the bluff.

"It will be impossible for us to know unless the moon breaks through the clouds."

"There is no moon to-night."

"Perhaps their cries for help when the vessel strikes will reach our ears."

"I doubt it unless the surf abates its noise, which is not likely."

But the elements seemed disposed to help these worthies, for just then a vivid flash of lightning—a somewhat unusual thing for that coast at the time of year of which we write—illuminated the heavens, and by the aid of this unlooked-for light the watchers plainly discerned the little sloop of the Scotch adventurer, which carried the heiress of Buenaventura and her fortunes, standing straight in toward the headland, and only about a mile from the land.

The lightning faded away and again the gloomy mantle of the night covered in both sea and land.

A dark and ferocious smile had appeared upon the face of Stuart McKerr as he noted the whereabouts of the little craft; the alcalde, ignorant of the coast, could only guess at the nearness of the danger to which the false beacon-light was luring the sloop; but the banker, being well-informed upon this point, saw at a glance that a miracle alone could save the Santa Maria from the fate which he had intended for her.

"Well, is she heading for the bar?" demanded the alcalde, anxiously.

"Yes, straight; within the next ten minutes she should strike."

"No danger of McAlpine suspecting the danger and avoiding it?"

"Oh, no," the merchant replied, quickly. "The light is here—the signal displayed expressly to guide him in; why should he suspect that aught is wrong? What reason has he to suppose that I desire to work him harm?"

"None in the world," the other replied, after a moment's thought. "But Sandy McAlpine is a bold and muscular man, a seaman used to brave the dangers of the wave," continued the alcalde, pursuing a train of thought which had arisen in his mind. "How far is it to where the wreck will take place?"

"About half a mile."

"Will he not be able to gain the shore?"

"It will be difficult, for the surf is running high, the undertow is strong, and the landing a most dangerous one."

"But it is not impossible that such a man as the adventurer might gain the shore?"

"Few things in this world are impossible to a bold man with a clear head and gifted with sufficient muscular strength to back his efforts."

"Clearly then, brother, this Sandy McAlpine will gain the shore."

"And we will receive him with pistol and knife, and then, when our work is done, cast him back for the waves to toy with and the slimy denizens of the deep to feed upon."

"We humans will be more merciless than the waves and the rock!" the alcalde cried, with a snarl and a laugh.

Again the lightning flamed forth, not the fierce fire which accompanies the thunder-gust, but the mild heat-lightning of the summer skies.

It was quite strong enough, though, to reveal to the lonely watchers upon the shore the sight which they so much desired to witness upon the sea.

Misled by the false light the Santa Maria had ridden full upon the bones of the stranded ship and these sharp pieces of oak had beaten in the sides of the sloop as though they were composed of paste-board rather than solid timbers.

Impaled upon these terrible spears the sloop appeared to the eyes of the dark plotters, revealed by the glare of the lightning. The sea ran high, and huge combing waves were sweeping over the craft from stem to stern. No human being could live on board the sloop and withstand that terrible sea unless lashed to the rigging, and, clearly, as the vessel had struck and filled without warning, the unfortunate souls on board could have had no opportunity to avail themselves of any such method of withstanding the attack of old ocean's merciless billows.

The light faded and darkness again veiled the scene.

"She must have just struck!" the alcalde cried; "now, we must to the beach, prepared to receive all that escape."

The two, in their excitement at the scene revealed by the lightning, had risen to their feet, and stood with straining eyes glaring out to sea.

"Come, then!" Stuart McKerr responded, and with the words, he snatched up the torch and drew a heavy revolver from his belt. The merchant-banker of Buenaventura evidently was determined to stop at nothing to attain the end that he desired.

And as the two men started to descend from the bluff to the beach below, again the lightning illuminated both sea and shore.

Eagerly the two gazed seaward.

The sloop was two-thirds under water, and the sea was making a clean sweep over her. Not a soul could be discerned clinging to the rigging.

"They are all in the water struggling for their lives!" McKerr cried, with hoarse joy, as he led the way to the beach.

"Which way does the tide set—up or down?"

"Down, at this stage of the water, so we must patrol the beach down by the town."

Away on their ill-omened mission the two sped but success did not crown their efforts, although they did not relax the search until the morning light came clear and strong.

Apparently not a soul had escaped from the wreck. Tiring at last of the fruitless quest, the two proceeded to the town. Repairing to the inn they breakfasted, and after the meal was finished, as they drew their chairs together to discuss their plans for the future, a little knot of idlers, gathered outside, attracted their attention.

A fisherman was in the center of the group, and he was relating to the throng how he and a companion, early that morning, had discovered the wreck of Sandy McAlpine's craft.

"And he had a female passenger aboard," the man said, in conclusion, "for on the beach, a mile or so north of the wreck, we saw a woman's body high on the shore. It was too rough for us to make a landing, so we thought we'd run in to the town and bring the news."

The alcalde of Santa Barbara was at once summoned, but Stuart McKerr and his companion in crime did not wait to accompany that dilatory individual, but hurried away at once to the spot which the fisherman had described.

The banker had made a mistake the previous night in regard to the tide; it had set north instead of south, and so the body had come on shore up the coast instead of down.

The fisherman's statement was quite correct, as the two plotters discovered upon approaching the spot where he had said the tide had deposited the body, but as they came within view of the place a shout of anger went up on the air from both throats.

The prairie wolves, the sneaking coyotes, had been before them!

A pack of snarling, snapping brutes were fighting over the body, and shreds of clothing which their eager jaws had rended from the corpse were not only scattered up and down the beach but were also borne by the breeze, now blowing fresh from the land—and rode on the crest of the billows beyond the line of the surf.

Drawing their revolvers, and dashing forward with loud shouts, the brothers essayed to drive the brutes from their prey.

They stretched a couple of the wolves over on their backs with two well-aimed shots and the rest of the pack took to their heels, trotting off with an angry yelp, although in truth there was little of the banquet left to attract them, for they had picked the bones almost clean. Nothing but a few remnants of clothing scattered about were left to indicate whether the bones belonged to man or woman. Even the skeleton had been torn apart by the fierce and famished brutes.

But the clothing fully proved to the satisfaction of both of the beholders that it was a woman's body which had disappeared in the hungry maws of the ravenous beasts.

"There is no doubt that this is the mortal remains of Barbara Buenaventura!" McKerr exclaimed.

"There was no other woman on board the craft?"

"No."

"It is certain, then," and as he spoke the alcalde stooped and picked up a little strip of white cloth that the wind brought to his feet. Upon the cloth a name was written in indelible ink. "Barbara," he said, showing McKerr the name.

"But the sealed packet—the packet which contains the secret of the hidden treasure!" cried McKerr, his eager eyes roaming up and down the beach in search of the precious article.

Vainly the two plotters looked for the treasure that they sought; it was not to be found; and at last they came to the reluctant conclusion that it had either become saturated with blood when the beasts commenced to rend their prey and so had been devoured by them, or else that, in their struggles, they had torn it open and the winds had carried it to the billows and then becoming saturated with water it had sunk.

Their scheme had removed from their path the unfortunate girl who had crossed a continent to grasp a fortune but found a grave instead.

CHAPTER VII.

TEJON CAMP.

On the upper waters of the Mohave river in the foot-hills of the San Gabriel mountain range the little mining town known as Tejon Camp was situated.

It was quite a prosperous little place of seventy-five or a hundred people, all told; pretty rough customers, too, nearly all of them, for Tejon Camp was the "jumping-off place" of civilization. When a man had been driven out of all the other mining towns, Tejon Camp always opened her arms to receive him, no matter how great were the fellow's crimes. It was away up in the mountains, fifty miles, fully, from the nearest town, surrounded by a wilderness of rocky crags and ravines wherein a fugitive from justice could easily bid defiance to pursuit; but to do Tejon Camp full justice it was a safe sanctuary for the felon fleeing from an outraged justice.

It was the proud boast of this odd mining-camp that no man, no matter how great his crimes, ever had sought shelter there and had been either refused shelter or given up to the officers of justice.

Quite a rich little bit of mining country surrounded the camp, and as the "diggings" was nearly all "surface-dirt," even the most indolent worker with the most primitive "tools" could contrive to pick up a living.

But even this peculiar "town," reputed to be the hardest camp south of Frisco, had its laws and its officers to enforce them.

Iron-fisted, broad-shouldered Alex Black was the alcalde of the town, for, following the example of the Mexican towns, their neighbors on the south, they called their chief magistrate by the old Spanish title. The code of justice which prevailed in the camp was extremely simple. A trial by battle generally settled all quarrels and to the victor went the spoil. Black ruled the town with a rod of iron, desperate and reckless as were the inhabitants, but he owned about half the town and had a strong body-guard at his back able to put down all opposition.

A single street only the camp boasted, running along the river's bank, and the shanties, which composed the town, faced the stream. As usual in all mining camps the largest house in the town was the hotel, and on this occasion the building was hotel, saloon and general store all in one, and bore on its front a rudely-executed sign which announced that its name was THE ALCALDE'S RANCH, kept by Alex Black.

It was about a month from the time that the Santa Maria left her bones on the inhospitable coast of Southern California that we convey the reader, in spirit, to the little mining camp in the San Gabriel foot-hills.

Night has fallen, and the usual motley crowd assembled, as they regularly did night after night, in the barroom of the hotel to gamble, drink and gossip.

The camp had received quite a noticeable addition to its inhabitants that day—a fat, long-haired bummer-sort-of-chap who had announced himself as Major Jake Smith, of Arkansas, and upon being taken before the alcalde and questioned as to who he was, as was the custom toward all strangers seeking the hospitality of the camp, and asked what crime he had committed to force him to seek refuge there, had coolly announced that he had poisoned a whole mining town by putting arsenic in the river that flowed by it and from which the inhabitants got their drinking water, and upon being questioned as to the particulars of the deed, still further astonished the alcalde by telling another big yarn so utterly incoherent that Black finally dismissed him with the remark that he was the biggest liar that he had ever seen, an observation which the fat vagabond evidently took as a compliment.

But if he was the champion liar, as he proudly announced himself, he very soon made it evident to some sharps of the hotel who tried his metal, that he knew a thing or two about cards, and that he was as skillful a cheat as ever had honored the camp with a visit.

The major sat in front of the bar, stretching out his long legs in the most comfortable manner, and astonishing the crowd with lie after lie, and all of them so monstrous that it seemed almost incredible that the mind of man could conceive such things.

The clock upon the wall had just struck nine when the door of the saloon opened and a second stranger entered, so different in appearance from the usual "pilgrim" that, instantly, every eye within the room was fixed upon him. He was a slender stripling, under the medium height, dressed like a native Californian, with a clear-cut, olive-tinged face, so dark as to suggest a thought of Indian blood.

Without paying any attention to the scrutiny of the crowd, the young man walked up to the monte table, over which the alcalde presided in person, and, taking a chair just left vacant by the abrupt departure of a "cleaned-out" miner, drew a buckskin bag of gold-dust from his pocket and began to play.

The alcalde smiled grimly as he noted the "fat" appearance of the bag, for he nothing doubted that he should soon be master of the wealth it contained, but on this occasion the goddess, Fortune, seemed determined to favor the Californian.

He won steadily; the alcalde began to frown; the

pile of gold before the stranger increased in size, as rapidly as the dealer's decreased.

Black looked glum; it was no joke to lose a thousand dollars in a night; but finding that luck persistently favored the young man, the alcalde put in practice the thieving device by which he had so often robbed the stranger of his gold.

He made an almost imperceptible sign to a huge, brawny ruffian who had stationed himself behind the stranger's chair, and was apparently deeply interested in watching his game.

The moment the ruffian received the signal he was quick to act.

"Durned if I didn't think so!" he cried, driving his knife through the buckskin bag and pinioning it to the table. "Ye're the man that robbed my cabin 't'other day, and this yere is my bag!"

The stranger started to his feet in alarm, a revolver gleaming in his hand, but before he could make a movement a strong arm seized the bully by the throat and forced him to his knees and at the same time pressed the cold muzzle of a revolver to his temple.

"You are a thief and a liar!" cried the new-comer, Jack Blake, the Fresh of Frisco.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRIAL BY BATTLE.

THE alcalde fairly gasped for breath as he gazed upon the features of the cool and determined man who had thus boldly bearded the lion in his den, for the face of Jack Blake was the face of the man whom he had seen in his vision, and who had shown him the ominous card signifying a grave!

Here was the man in living life, bold and hardy enough to take sides against him in a quarrel not his own.

"A liar and a thief!" repeated Blake, emphatically. "You know that this money isn't yours; you are only taking advantage of your brute size to try to bully this gentleman out of it, you big scoundrel!"

"What concern is this of yours, young man?" cried the alcalde, rising, having in a measure recovered from his confusion. "It is not your quarrel; why, then, do you interfere?"

"Because I choose to," replied Blake, coolly. "That is my little gait in this world; mebbe it would be better for me to mind my own business many a time, but I can't; it's a failing I've got whenever I see anybody imposed upon to put in my oar."

"You are a stranger here—what do you want?" demanded the alcalde, sternly.

"What's that to you, anyway?" replied Blake, defiantly.

"I'm the alcalde of this town, and I've a right to know," Black retorted.

"Oh, you're the alcalde, are you—the man that owns and runs Tejon Camp? Well, you've got one man in it now that you can neither own nor run, and just as soon as I settle with this fellow, I'll be ready to give you all the satisfaction that you want. Pick up your money, young man," he said to the Californian. "Don't be afraid! If any man-jack here attempts to prevent you, I'll bore a hole through him on the spot!"

The threat had due effect and the young man was permitted to gather up his gains without molestation, for the bystanders saw that the alcalde himself was somewhat puzzled by the stranger's boldness and uncertain how to deal with him.

"You don't dare to give me a chance!" growled the bully, on his knees.

"Oh! you want a chance, do you?"

"Release the man!" commanded the alcalde, and to enforce the threat he drew a revolver from his belt, but in a twinkling another silver-mounted pistol glistened in the hand of the bold and reckless Fresh, and the alcalde saw that he was covered by a self-cocking weapon which only required a single pull upon the trigger to discharge the ball.

"If you attempt to cock that weapon I shall be obliged to bore you!" Blake cried, in a tone which very clearly betrayed that he was not to be trifled with.

The alcalde set his teeth together in a rage; never before since he had led his followers into the little valley and founded the mining town of Tejon Camp had mortal man dared to brave him.

"You have grossly insulted this man and according to our law he is entitled to a trial by battle if he demands it."

"I do! Blazes! am I to be handled this hyer way without getting satisfaction for it?" the giant growled.

"A fair fight, eh?"

"Yes!" the alcalde cried.

"Put up your weapon then, and I'm agreeable."

The alcalde did not much relish the tone of command which this bold young man used, but he resolved to quietly bide his time, and so he shoved back the revolver into his belt.

Blake released the giant and he rose sulkily to his feet, shaking himself like a huge dog just emerged from the water.

"See hyer, my little cock-sparrow, I ain't used to bein' handled in this hyer way, an' I'm jes' a-goin' to make you pay fur it. Do you know who I am?"

"I hain't the pleasure," Blake responded, with an extremely polite bow, which only seemed to inflame the wrath of the big ruffian.

"Wal, my name is Dave Mendoza, and I'm the giant of the Mohave, I am! Now, who are you?"

"Jackson Blake."

And then a solitary voice cried out: "The Fresh of Frisco!" Even in this remote mining-camp the evil fame of the man had preceded him, for a hum of astonishment followed the announcement of the name.

"Oh, yes, that's my handle; I see that I'm no stranger by reputation, at least to some of you. Oh, it's pleasant for a pilgrim to fall among friends!" there was an air of bitter sarcasm in the speaker's voice as he spoke, which gave the lie to his words.

"Wal, fresh or no fresh, you're my mutton!" responded the giant. "I reckon that I don't 'low no man to take me by the throat and choke the wind out of me, like as if I war a yaller dog of no 'count."

The bully had never heard of the well-known sport and little guessed what an encounter with him implied. Nor had the alcalde of Tejon Camp any knowledge of the man. For some years he had resided in the wilderness, first as a master herdsman for old Michael Scott, and then, when the gold ex-

citement broke out, as the master-spirit and founder of the mining town.

But, Alex Black was no fool, and he guessed from the sensation that the name of the bold man, who had dared to brave him in his own saloon, had created when he announced it, as well as from the strangeness of the designation, that he had to deal with no common man.

Mendoza, the Mohave giant, was a noted bully, an excellent pistol shot, and the alcalde had very little doubt that he would be able to give a good account of the stranger.

"To the open air!" Black cried; "there is a bright moon, and this quarrel might as well be settled now as at any other time."

"Oh, I'm agreeable," Blake responded, and then the crowd within the saloon surged forth into the open air.

"Why should you enter upon this quarrel for my sake?" the Californian youth cried quickly in the ear of Blake as they passed through the door.

"It's a habit I have," he replied, lightly. "I can't keep out of mischief to save me! Besides, you are no match for this big bully. It is all a game to rob you of your dust. I saw the alcalde signal to this fellow when he saw that the game was going heavily against him. This town is all a den of thieves; maybe it will be cleaned out some time. And your face, too, I like the looks of it. I saw that you were to be imposed upon and I made up my mind to take a hand in the matter, like a fool, too, as I always am, for my game at present is to lay low, keep my eyes open, and say nothing."

"But you must not fight for me!" the Californian urged, his voice deep, musical and clear; the lad was evidently of no common blood.

"Oh, don't worry your head about that! It's a pleasure to me; besides, this quarrel with the bully of Tejon Camp has got to come some time if I stay here, and I might as well make a beginning."

"But this man may kill you!" the stripling urged.

"Alive or dead, it's all one to me and to the rest of the world, too, I guess," Blake replied, carelessly.

"But, don't you worry about me. Before this camp is an hour older I'll show them a trick or two with the revolver that I'll bet a trifle the Mohave region never saw before, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Let me fight this man!" the youth demanded, with kindling eyes.

"All right—after I get through with him." And Blake laughed as he spoke. It was a simple speech, but the tone made it full of fearful meaning.

"After he got through with him!" If the Fresh of Frisco's reputation was not unjustly gained, the giant would be of very little use to any one in this world after Blake had finished with him.

In the open air the crowd gathered in little knots, eager to witness the coming fight.

The big, round moon, riding full in the heavens, looked down in silent majesty upon the scene; many a bloody fight had Madam Luna witnessed in that little valley through which ran the Mohave stream.

"Now, stranger, listen to the conditions," the alcalde said. "Forty paces apart you will be placed; your pistols in your hands. I will give the signal; you will draw, advance and fire, and after you've emptied your revolvers you can fall back on your bowie-knives. Is that satisfactory?"

"As fair as fair can be!" Blake exclaimed, sentimentally.

"Cor-eck!" yelled the giant. "Pick out your grave, young feller, for you'll need it afore you're ten minutes older!"

Blake smiled contemptuously, but did not deign to reply to the vaunt.

"Stranger, you pace off down the street twenty paces; Mendoza, you go up. Halt at the word and then turn, and at the word, begin," the alcalde said. "Go ahead!"

And then the two started.

Each and every man in the crowd counted the paces.

The twenty were paced off, and then the alcalde cried:

"Halt! Are you ready? Turn and fire."

The fun was about to begin.

CHAPTER IX.

SOME SHARP SHOOTING.

BOTH of the men turned promptly at the signal; the bright moonlight distinctly illuminated the scene. They advanced with measured steps, each keeping a wary eye upon the other.

The spectators held their breath in anxious suspense.

Then, all of a sudden, the giant raised his arm and leveled his revolver; he was taking deliberate aim; but, quick as a flash up came the arm of Blake, not to the level of his eyes but merely to his breast, and the sharp report of the revolver instantly followed; the giant was slowly cocking his piece at the time, but he did not wait to fire, he simply threw the pistol down as though it had suddenly become red-hot in his gripe, and then commenced dancing about as if a whole nest of bees were stinging him.

"Ow, ow!" he howled, to the intense amazement of the crowd, the alcalde included. "Oh, murder! oh, blazes! ow, ow!"

Such a war-dance hadn't been witnessed in the streets of Tejon Camp for some time.

"What's the matter?" cried the alcalde in a rage; "is the fool mad?"

And as for Blake, with a quiet smile upon his face he stood still and watched the antics of the giant.

"This man's life is at my mercy," he said, "but I hate to interfere with any man's enjoyment," and he laughed quietly to himself.

Perhaps it was enjoyment: the giant was dancing briskly enough; still, from the expression upon his face as well as from the vigorous way in which he was swearing, it would seem to indicate that, although a man might dance, yet he might not be highly entertained thereby.

"What the blazes is the matter with you?" the alcalde cried, losing patience at last and striding up to the apparently crazy man.

"Oh, my funny-bone! ow! murder! oh!" cried the fellow, recovering in part from the shock, and then he stripped up his shirt-sleeve—he wore no coat, a dirty red shirt being the only garment over the upper part of his body—and on the elbow showed the red crease where the ball had just grazed the flesh.

For a moment the alcalde was dumbfounded, this was the most marvelous shot that he had ever seen,

but he could not bring himself to believe that it was the result of design. Surely no living man could be so excellent a shot.

"See hyer, Black, I've got about enough of this!" protested the bully. "Wot kind of chance do I stand with this hyer cuss wot kin bark a feller's elbow and not half try? Blamed ef I see'd him take any aim at all!"

"It was only an accident!" the alcalde replied. "It is not possible that any man in the world could make such a shot."

"But, see hyer, Mister Black; I want to quit, I do! Durned ef this feller hain't taken the steel all outen me."

"Going to show the white feather, eh, Mendoza?" the alcalde sneered.

"No man ever sed that of me!" the bully blustered.

"But the whole town will say it, if you give this thing up."

"But a man wot kin tickle you on the funny-bone with a revolver bullet," the giant persisted, ruefully.

"An accident; it's a hundred to one that he couldn't do it again."

"Do you think so?" The bully was loth to renew the struggle.

"No doubt about it at all!"

"Oh, well, I s'pose I'll have to tackle him ag'in then," but from the look on the face of the man it was plain that he had no relish for the contest.

"Take your places again," commanded the alcalde, as he strode back to his former position.

"Hold on!" cried Blake; "I reckon that this man's life belongs to me now, and I don't see as I am called upon to risk mine against his again. I appeal to the crowd! I could have shot the fellow a dozen times when he was dancing up and down with his revolver on the ground, only I scorn to murder an unarmed man in cold blood. It was my aim to deprive him of his weapon and I fired on purpose to disarm him."

"An accidental shot; you can't do it again!" the alcalde declared.

"Oh, can't I?" Blake retorted, scornfully. "Well, go on with your bird's egging, and I'll show you another shot just as good."

The giant stared at the words, and an uneasy expression appeared upon his face. In truth he had already had taste enough of the quality of the stranger, and was not "hankering" after any more; but, urged on by the taunting words of Black, he resolved to do the best he could, although he feared for the result; but, then, if he backed out now, that would end his career as the bully of the camp forever, and he feared the sneers and jeers of the miners almost as much as he did the weapon of the stranger.

"Now, then, are you ready?" Black cried.

"Ready," responded Blake, promptly.

"Ready," answered the bully, but not at all promptly, and, from the manner in which he uttered the word, it was plain that he had no heart in the contest.

"Fire, then!" the alcalde cried.

At the word, Blake advanced rapidly upon his antagonist, the revolver gleaming in his hand, but the weapon carried low down at his side.

The giant had also advanced at the word, but not particularly quick, and the rapid movement of his antagonist so confused him that he halted irresolute and began to take aim. He had a presentiment that a single shot would be all that would be allowed him, and that if he did not succeed in disabling the stranger at the first fire, he would not get another opportunity.

The extreme pains that the bully took defeated the purpose. He waited until the stranger came within range; he waited until he was certain of the aim, and then, just as he was about to pull the trigger, Blake anticipated him with the same rapid movement that had proven so effective before, and apparently again without taking aim.

The sharp crack of the revolver was followed by a howl of pain from the giant and he tumbled over backward, apparently done for.

Four or five of the lookers-on rushed to his assistance as he rolled over and over on the ground, howling with pain.

"W'at's the matter? Whar has he plugged you?" cried a sympathizing friend.

"Ow, ow! I dunno!" roared the giant.

"Here's blood on his shoulder!" cried a keen-eyed observer.

It was true; the Fresh of Frisco had "plugged" his man this time, but he had not aimed at the shoulder as one of the bystanders speedily discovered, for this inquisitive Dick had picked up the giant's revolver and made the astounding discovery that the stranger had shot the hammer away so that the weapon was rendered harmless.

A cry of amazement went up from the crowd when this fact was made known and even the red-headed, iron-faced alcalde seemed amazed.

Never before had Tejon Camp seen such marksmanship.

The bullet had glanced after carrying away the hammer and had entered the bully's shoulder, inflicting a slight flesh-wound only, which fact was speedily discovered and made public, much to the relief of the giant.

But, the bully of the Mohave rose from the ground an altered man. He was whipped, and henceforth life in Tejon Camp had for him no charms, so he slunk away and disappeared.

Blake turned to the alcalde.

"Well, is there anybody else that wants satisfaction?" he asked. "Now that I've got my hand in, I might as well accommodate all that care to be accommodated."

There was many a dark look on the faces of the bystanders, but after the display of skill that Blake had exhibited there wasn't one of the bullies of the town that cared to take up the bold challenge.

"Well, as no one speaks, I conclude that you're all satisfied, eh?" And as he spoke Blake looked around him with a scornful smile upon his clear-cut, handsome face. It was something of a triumph for him, alone and single-handed, to walk into the roughest mining town that was in all California, and make the bold fighting-men of the camp acknowledge his power.

"You have held your own, young man, and no one has any cause of complaint against you," the alcalde confessed, his tone quite gracious. He had

reflected upon the matter during the last few moments. Why should he wage war against this stranger who was so well able to protect himself? Why not make an ally of this bold and skillful fellow, turn him from an enemy into a friend? It was a capital idea, the shrewd Mr. Black thought, and he determined to act upon it as soon as possible.

Blake bowed gracefully.

"If everybody else is satisfied, so am I," he said. "I never yet went round this world trying to tread upon anybody's toes."

"Have you ever visited this camp before?"

"Never."

"We have some rules here which we require all new-comers to abide by, and if they do not like them, and do not care to live under them, why, then we expect they will depart, seek some other abiding-place, and yet take no offense."

"That seems fair enough," Blake remarked, and he looked inquiringly at the young Californian.

"I can see no objection," the stripling said.

"At eight to-morrow, then, call upon me in my office and I will explain matters. And now, boys, let's all take a social drink."

The clarity with which this invitation was accepted clearly proved that the alcalde was a popular man, or else that the crowd was extremely dry.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE REQUEST.

The crowd slowly dispersed, the most of them returning to the saloon, while the remainder sauntered off to their cabins to retire for the night.

The Californian approached the man who had so pluckily taken up his quarrel—and so successfully prosecuted it—and grasped him warmly by the hand.

The contact of the slender, womanly fingers sent a strange thrill through the stalwart frame of Blake, for the hand was as cold as ice.

"I owe you a thousand thanks for this service," the young man exclaimed, "but, alas! I fear that it will never be in my power to repay you for the favor."

"Oh, don't speak of it," Blake replied, walking slowly up the street, the Californian keeping him company so as to get out of earshot of the loungers who were loitering about.

"Ah! but I should speak of it!" the other replied, quickly. "The weight of obligation will press me down unless I can find some way to cancel it."

"It is a foolish habit I have of thrusting myself into quarrels that do not concern me in the least, but, ever since I can remember, I could never bear to stand tamely by and see any one imposed upon. This town, you know, is nothing but a den of thieves. I don't believe that there are ten decent, honest men in the place. This is the Alsatia of the Pacific slope. If you are anything of a scholar you may remember that, in the olden time, there was a certain part of London where thieves and criminals of all kinds found a safe harbor, and it was the boast of the inhabitants of the district that the officers of the law never dared to seize their prey within its bounds. That was the old Alsatia, this is the new. No sheriff ever chased his man into this valley and attempted to take him out. Why? The inhabitants would rise en masse to resist the outrage."

"And what brings you here, among the wretched criminals?" cried the Californian, abruptly.

Blake laughed.

"Suppose I put the same question to you, eh?"

"You are not a criminal—you are not a thief—your hands are not red with blood!" the young man cried with astonishing earnestness.

"I am a criminal and yet I am not one; I am not a thief, yet many a time I have taken money for which I did not work! There's a riddle for you."

"In this wild, strange land, men sometimes stain their hands with blood, and yet are innocent of any actual crime; for, amid these rude scenes each man is a law unto himself. You have taken life, perhaps, in self-defense; who then can blame you? You have won money at the gaming-table; it can hardly be called a crime when every one does it," the Californian replied, slowly and deliberately.

"Ah, I see, my young friend, that you are determined to make a hero out of me," Blake observed, banteringly. "But you never got hold of worse material for that purpose in all your life. Believe what I tell you, for I am a man of my word whatever else my faults may be—when I say to you that I'm as big a rascal, in certain ways, as ever went unhung. Heaven gave me wonderful strength and skill, and I have sadly misused both. I am no boy now, and with the advantages that I've had in this world I ought to amount to something, instead of being the wretched outcast that I am."

"You an outcast? No, I will not believe it!" the youth exclaimed, vehemently. "No, you are too noble—too generous!"

"Oh, you've got the wrong idea entirely!" Blake cried, laughing at the warmth of the other. "I see that you don't know me. Why, I'm the biggest devil that ever escaped a white jail! If there's a quarrel going on anywhere around me it seems an utter impossibility for me to keep out of it."

"And you always take the weaker side, eh? as you did to-night?"

"Now don't you let this feeling of gratitude run away with you," Blake said, soberly. "Probably the best advice that I can give you is to warn you to keep away from me. I am an outcast from the civilized world; only in some wretched spot like this cutthroat town would my sojourn be permitted. I'm telling you the honest truth when I say that I've been warned by the vigilantes out of nearly every mining camp clear from here to Frisco. Go where you will, up and down this Pacific slope, and you'll find the name of Jack Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, is pretty well known—as it was here to-night. An evil reputation travels fast."

"And why do these men persecute you?" the youth persisted.

"Persecute!" and Blake laughed again; "oh, but that's not the word, you know. It isn't persecution; it is justice; it's the law reaching with its long arms for the man who has dared to disobey its rules."

"They hunt you from their town because you are more skillful and braver than the rest of the people—the common herd—and they fear you. You shoot the men who attack you! you win the money of the men who banter you to play! Is it a crime to do this?"

The youth evidently was determined to make a hero out of the man who had befriended him.

"Oh, but I knock men down in the dark and go through their pockets; I waylay drunken miners and ease them of their gold-dust; I carry three or four packs of cards up my sleeves and so ring in a 'cold deal' on my opponents; in fact, I'm just as bad as they make 'em!"

The Californian regarded his companion for a moment with an incredulous look upon his face, and then he slowly shook his head.

They had strolled on until they had got away from the loungers in front of the saloon, and then halting, continued their conversation, the moonlight being so bright that they could see each other's faces as plainly as by day.

"You are not so bloodthirsty as you wish to make out," the youth said. "You could easily have killed that rough fellow to-night if you had wished. Twice his life was at your mercy and yet you spared him."

"The overgrown fool!" Blake cried, in contempt. "He was but the tool of this precious scoundrel of an alcalde. I scorn to wreak my vengeance upon the servant when I can easily reach the master."

"This alcalde is your foe?" and the eyes of the youth sparkled, strangely, as he put the question.

Blake was somewhat astonished, not so much at the question as by the look upon the face of the other.

"My foe—well, that's a hard question to answer. I never saw the man before to-night, and never offended him in any way except by blocking his game in regard to you."

"But he is your foe!" the boy asseverated with strange earnestness; "you know that he is your foe, and that he will do you a harm if he can, and you are not the man to tamely submit to any wrong from him, even though he is the alcalde of the town?"

"No, not if he were a thousand alcaldes," Blake replied.

"He is my enemy!" the youth continued, hurriedly, and with excited speech, "but he does not know me. Under a false name I come, but if he was to discover who and what I am, he would instantly attempt my life—he would set his cutthroats at me—he would hunt me down as the gaunt wolves on the prairie pull down the wounded buffalo. I need a friend, for alone I cannot cope with this man. Will you be that friend? Will you dare to back my quarrel against this bloody-minded alcalde as you did my quarrel with his ruffianly tool? I cannot pay you now; I have some money, but only enough to enable me to carry out the plans which I came hither to execute, but, in the future, I shall be rich, and gladly will I share with you all that I gain!"

Blake gazed with wonder at the youth, speaking as he did, like one inspired, and, strange mixture of cautious coolness and impetuous recklessness as he was, he became fired with something of his companion's spirit.

"It's a bargain!" he cried, extending his hand; "I'll back your quarrel even to the death!"

A warm grasp of hands closed the compact, then the two sauntered slowly back to the hotel, secured their rooms, and retired for the night, for, by the time the conversation ended, as we have described, it was near midnight.

Blake, ever cautious, secured the door with its little wooden bar, for locks and bolts were scarce articles in Tejon Camp, and threw himself, all dressed, upon the rude bunk and drew the blanket over him.

It was some time before slumber came, for many strange thoughts were in his mind, yet, when he did sleep, he slept soundly; but from his sleep he was rudely awakened. Strong hands were upon him—strong cords bound him—he knew it not, but the Black Men of Tejon had seized him for their prey.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SON OF MICHAEL SCOTT.

The alcalde sat in his private room in the Alcalde's Ranch. It was a small apartment built out at the extreme end of the building, just behind the bar, communicating with the main room by a stout door, which was evidently constructed with a view to defense against an unwelcome visitor, for bold and reckless as was the red-bearded alcalde of this wild and lawless town, he had in his time encountered men as bold and reckless as himself, and on two or three occasions he had been hunted hotly to his den and closely imprisoned there by infuriated desperadoes and only released by the sounding of a general alarm which had roused the town to his rescue.

Bullet-proof, therefore, was the door leading from the saloon into the private room, as was also the other door to the room which led into the open air, and from this second door, if the occupant of the room was closely pushed by foes forcing their way in by the saloon entrance, easy escape could be made to the shelter of the wooded foot-hills only a few hundred yards away, for a spur of the mountain chain was quite near, which frowned down upon the little valley and forced the waters of the Mohave stream from their natural destination, the wide Pacific, into the great sandy desert where the parched earth greedily drank up the whole volume of the river, and the stream, which at its source promised to swell into a mighty current whereon the navies of the world might ride, dwindled into nothing and expired. These "sinks" wherein quite large streams are swallowed up are one of the wonders of the far Western plains.

The alcalde's apartment was extremely scantily furnished; a rude hammock-like bed, a few boxes covered with skins, a rude table and a couple of chairs, evidently the work of some Mohave valley carpenter, and not the product of civilization, and that was about all.

There was only a single window in the room, and that placed high in the wall looked into the saloon. Another method of precaution, this, against a hostile attack.

It was near midnight and the alcalde sat moody and thoughtful. The appearance of the Fresh of Frisco in camp troubled him. After the duel, in which Blake had so successfully vanquished his antagonist, upon his return to the saloon the alcalde had taken pains to question some of the miners in regard to the stranger and the account which he had received did not please him.

Rumor with her hundred tongues had done even more than full justice to the outcast, for she made

The Fresh of Frisco.

aim out to be a second Hercules in strength, a rival of an opera-dancer in lightness of foot, a very "Nonpareil" in boxing, a better man than a Cornish champion in wrestling, as sure a shot as any Kentucky rifleman who had ever brought weapon to shoulder, a Beau Brummell in manner, and a wizard for luck at the gaming table.

And the alcalde, with these wondrous tales in his ears, retired to his private apartment to meditate how he should deal with this remarkable man, whose wandering footsteps had chanced to stray into the town of Tejon Camp.

A dangerous man for an enemy, perhaps also equally dangerous as a friend.

And as the alcalde sat and mused upon the subject there came an odd, peculiar knock at the outer door.

The alcalde lifted his head and listened, for he could hardly believe that he had heard aright.

The peculiar knock was repeated.

"It is he, sure enough!" he exclaimed, and rising he hastened to the door. His old cautious habits did not desert him though, for before he opened the door he made sure of his visitor.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"Open; it is I, Buenaventura!" was the reply.

The alcalde undid the fastenings, for this door too was barricaded as though it was the entrance to a fortress, opened the door, admitted the applicant, and then securely fastened the portal again.

The visitor was Stuart McKerr.

The merchant was booted to the thigh and armed to the teeth; a broad sombrero upon his head, and a costly Mexican blanket, worn like a horseman's cloak, concealed his person.

Upon their parting in Santa Barbara the alcalde had arranged with the merchant in regard to a visit to Tejon Camp, should circumstances demand it, but he had not expected him so soon.

"Sit down, man; I'm glad to see you, although your coming is unexpected, and I suppose that means that you bring bad news."

"Well, you're right this time!" replied the merchant, flinging aside his hat and blanket, and seating himself by the table. "Have you a sup of whisky handy? I'm as stiff as a ramrod, and chilled by this keen mountain air. I tell you, man, it is no joke for me to ride post-haste from Buenaventura up to this hole without hardly drawing bridle-rein."

The alcalde hastened to place refreshments before his guest.

"Well," he said, after the merchant had taken a good pull at the whisky, "what is it? Did the sealed packet which you say the girl carried concealed about her person escape the perils of wind and wave, and has it fallen into the hands of a foe? or has the girl herself come to life again?"

"Oh, no, both packet and girl have vanished from this world forever; there is no danger of either one of the two ever coming to life again, but a new danger menaces us and threatens, unless we use prompt and violent measures, to totally defeat our plans."

"Aha! well, that is bad news; but explain the particulars at once."

"The son of old Michael Scott has come!"

"The son of Michael Scott!" the alcalde exclaimed, in amazement.

"Yes, his son! Now don't look at me as if you thought that I was dreaming or had lost the use of my wits. I know what I am talking about well enough."

"But I never knew that old Michael Scott had a son, that is unless you mean the father of this girl, whom we lured to death with the false beacon-light, and you told me that he was dead."

"Oh, it is not that party at all; this is a son of his old age, the child of a Californian girl, who was the daughter of the herdsman in the old man's employ. The old man fell in love with the girl, and induced her to run away from her home and take up her abode with a friend of his just outside Buenaventura, and there he secretly visited her. I knew of this at the time, but I had no idea that the minx had persuaded the old man to marry her. In time a child was born—a boy, and shortly after the birth of the child the mother fell in love with a Mexican officer, whose acquaintance she chanced to make, and being a fickle jade, and, woman-like, tired of her old lover, she ran off with the new, carrying the boy with her. Nothing was ever heard of her, and the affair had utterly passed out of my mind, when I made my calculations in regard to the estate, but now, all of a sudden, the boy has appeared, a bright stripling and a bold one; he proclaims himself the son of his father; swears that his mother was legally married by one of the priests of the mission to old Scott, and announces his intention to lay claim at once to all his father left, including the secret cache in the mountains, in regard to which he seems to be pretty well informed."

"How did you happen to learn all these particulars?" asked the alcalde, astonished at the extent of the other's information.

"Did you ever hear of the half-breed named Jose, El Embustero?"

"Jose, the liar! oh, yes; he used to be old Scott's body-servant, and since his death he has become a worthless, drunken sot; I doubt if he draws a sober breath a month. El Embustero, or to freely translate it, the liar, that's his title, and he's as well known from here to Buenaventura as any man that can be named."

"I take a very great interest in that drunken vagabond," McKerr observed, quietly.

"You do?" the alcalde cried, in astonishment.

"Oh, yes, so much so that I keep a constant watch upon him so that he shall not come to harm. Some one of my spies keeps him in sight day and night."

"But why?" asked the alcalde. "I do not understand; what do you care about the fellow?"

"I am convinced that that worthless, drunken old Indian carries within his head the secret of Michael Scott's treasure cache in these mountains."

The alcalde started in surprise.

"Is it possible?" he cried.

"It is more than possible; the half-breed was with the old man when he died; he closed his eyes, and I am satisfied from certain things which have come to my knowledge that Jose possesses the secret of the cache."

"The secret is ours then!"

"Oh, no, the old rascal is as tight as a drum; he is faithful to the trust reposed in him, for I have an

idea that old Scott, with his dying breath, charged him never to reveal the secret of the cache but to one of his blood."

"Either the son or daughter of Scott would answer then?"

"Yes, and this young man called upon the half-breed, held a long interview with him and then departed for this place."

"Oho! he is here then, and I guess that I know him!"

"Yes, by my spies I was informed of the affair, and when my watcher, who had plied his trade so well as to overhear part of the conversation, informed me that old Jose called the youth Miguel Scott, I instantly comprehended the danger that threatened our plans, and at once took horse and followed in pursuit."

"He is a young stripling, and now that I take note of it, he does bear a great resemblance to old Michael Scott, for I have seen the bird and hold him now securely caged!" the alcalde cried.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLACK MEN OF TEJON.

No weak child or timid coward was Jackson Blake, to tamely submit to this midnight attack without a struggle, and he could resist, too, for the vast strength which dwelt within his muscular frame would never have been judged correctly by the outward seeming.

It was a peculiarity of the man that he always awoke with all his senses on the alert, a habit forced upon him by the wild life of adventure which he had led for so many years.

A single instant, then, and Blake at once comprehended what had occurred; no thought as to who his assailants were, or why he was assailed, crossed his mind; it was enough for him that he was in danger, and he acted promptly.

With one mighty effort he essayed to burst the cords which bound his limbs.

The Black Men of Tejon had fettered many a prisoner since the time when they had first commenced their midnight excursions, and therefore no bunglers were they in the art of noosing an unconscious and helpless sleeper as tightly as a turkey trussed for roasting; but on this occasion the mighty strength of the man, whom they had so mysteriously attacked, set at naught all their rope-tying skill, thanks to the weakness of the cords that they had used, although each and every one seemed strong enough to hang a man.

The cords snapped like so many cotton strings and Blake reached for his revolver.

If he had ever got that trusty tool in his hand, the disguised band, who called themselves the Black Men of Tejon, would have suffered severely, for six lives at least the Fresh of Frisco carried in the weapon; but the midnight marauders were prompt to act.

One threw a heavy blanket over Blake's head as he sat upright in the bed, after the violent effort which had burst the cords, and essayed to grasp his revolver; three or four more—there were six in all—flung themselves upon him and by main force attempted to overpower him.

The bunk, never having been calculated to withstand such weight, gave way with a crash and came tumbling to the ground, and amid the ruins the desperate men struggled.

The heavy blanket wound around Blake's head prevented him from making an outcry, if he had thought of attempting such a thing, which in truth he did not, for with men of the Fresh of Frisco's stamp, they are much more likely to endeavor to fight their own battles than to call upon others to help them.

In any civilized locality the crash of the falling bunk and noise of the desperate struggle would have been certain to excite attention and provoke inquiry; but such commotions were far too common in the Alcalde's Ranch to arrest attention. Hardly a night passed without some drunken miner breaking down his bed, and then sitting amid the ruins, like Marius of Carthage, swore loudly enough to awake the Seven Sleepers, or else some unfortunate wretch in the clutches of the vivacious "Man-with-the-poker" made night hideous with his fiendish yells and his frantic endeavors to kill the snakes and rats which he imagined were attacking him.

Therefore, as the noise of the struggle in the apartment of Blake was but trifling compared to the usual racket when any of the lodgers got on a rampage, it excited absolutely no attention at all.

The struggle was a desperate one, although brief, for even Blake, with all his wonderful strength, was no match for the six stalwart fellows, particularly as they gained quite an advantage at the beginning by muffling him in folds of the heavy blanket.

The moon shining into the room afforded plenty of light for the assailants to see what they were about, and in spite of Blake's desperate struggles they succeeded in overpowering and binding him anew; not with cords this time, however, but with lariats made of untanned leather, strong enough to hold a wild bull on the prairie.

The job was fairly completed this time; Blake was bound hand and foot, his head muffled in a second blanket in addition to the first, in order to avoid the possibility of his giving an alarm; and then, lifting a trap-door in the floor, by means of which the ruffians had evidently gained access to the room, they raised their prisoner in their arms and descended the steps which led from the room below up to the trap-door.

The last man down closed the trap and fastened it by a heavy wooden button upon the under side so that it would be impossible for any one to open the trap in the room above.

The trap-door was a cunningly contrived plan to either rob or murder, without detection, the unsuspecting occupant of the sleeping-room.

As Blake had truly said, Tejon Camp was a den of thieves, and the very head-quarters of the gang was in the Alcalde's Ranch.

The room into which the men descended was a narrow cubby-hole of a place, totally unfurnished, and, when the trap above was closed, as dark as Egypt. It was evidently built expressly to afford a secret way to the sleeping-room above.

It was easy enough when a man sought accommodations at the Alcalde's Ranch to assign him to this room, and then he could be plundered, and yet no

traces left of the manner in which the robbery was perpetrated.

As we have said, when the trap-door closed the gang found themselves in utter darkness, but they were provided against this, for one of them drew a candle from his pocket, lighted it and then, stooping, lifted a trap-door in the floor which revealed another flight of steps, similar to the one which led to the room above, and as this second apartment was on the ground floor it was evident that there was some sort of a cellar underneath into which the steps led.

The cellar under the Alcalde's Ranch would have rather astonished most of the people of Tejon Camp, for only the members of the Black Men knew of it.

"Three of you carry him to the Judgment Hall, disarm him and prepare for trial; the rest come with me," said one of the masked men who seemed to be the leader of the gang.

Two of the men carried the helpless prisoner bodily down the stairs, the third lighting the way with the candle.

It was a dark, inky gulf into which they descended, not a cellar, but merely a narrow underground passage winding through the bowels of the earth.

After the party with the prisoner disappeared from sight, the rest quitted the room by a door which led from the secret chamber directly into the saloon.

The room was deserted now. The gang had entered it at the lower end at one corner; they went straight across to the other corner and a secret door there admitted them into just such another room as the one which had the trap-door in it leading to the underground passage.

This too had the trap-door in the ceiling leading to the room above, with the convenient steps for gaining access to it. Also a trap-door in the floor through which the underground passage could be gained.

Cautiously groping his way in the dark to the steps the leader of the party ascended and, placing his ear against the trap-door, listened attentively.

It was plain that two of these cunningly devised rooms, so that robbery or murder could be easily perpetrated, the Alcalde's Ranch possessed.

Not a sound could the listener hear, and, satisfied that the occupant of the chamber was wrapped in slumber's chain, the masked man, slowly and cautiously, lifted up the trap-door, first twisting the button around.

Thanks to the rays of the moon the room was sufficiently lighted to enable objects to be clearly distinguished.

Upon the rude bunk the Californian was stretched, his blanket drawn over him, his senses securely wrapped in sleep. Many a long mile had his good horse covered that day and it was only natural that the rider, sorely fatigued by the journey, should sleep soundly.

Besides, too, the Californian had no thought of danger; why should he have when even the wily and quick-witted Fresh of Frisco, deceived by the really strong bar upon the door, and believing that it was utterly impossible for any one to force an entrance without making considerable noise, had retired to rest perfectly satisfied that there was no danger, and that even if foes threatened, the stout bar would be a sure protection against a surprise?

But the Black Men of Tejon were scientific cut-throats, and they worked by craft and cunning more than by open force.

The Californian slept, unconscious of danger, while the outlaws gathered in force around the bed.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAVE OF JUDGMENT.

BLAKE, bound and gagged by the blanket, was borne onward by the men who had assailed him; so securely was he fettered that he was incapable of moving, much less of offering resistance. He kept his wits about him, though, so as to be able to discover whether he was being borne. He was sorely at a loss to understand the meaning of this strange proceeding. When he had been first attacked he had supposed that the intent of the assailants was robbery, for he fully understood all about the delusion that the majority of men entertained in regard to him; they believed that he was rolling in wealth and generally carried large sums of money upon his person; therefore when the unexpected and ferocious attack was made upon him, naturally he believed that the assailants sought his hidden stores, and when he was overpowered by the superior numbers and securely bound, he laughed in his sleeve at the disappointment that was in store for his captors when they "went for" his wealth.

Great was Blake's astonishment then, when after binding him hand and foot, so as to render him incapable of any resistance, instead of immediately proceeding to relieve him of his valuables, as he had expected, they raised him in their arms and carried him down the steps.

And then when the descent into the lower regions was accomplished and the passage through the underground pathway was begun, Blake knew at once from the chilly dampness of the air that they were beneath the surface of the earth, and his wonder increased. What was the meaning of this strange proceeding and what did they intend to do with him?

On went the procession, the guide ahead with the sputtering candle, which struggled manfully against the damp currents of air that swelled through the passage, the two men following close on his heels carrying the captive, and no easy task was it for them either, although both of them were big, powerful, brawny men, but Blake with his hundred and fifty pounds of solid flesh was no light burden, and before they had got half-way through the passage the bearers began to grunt and swear, while the sweat poured off their faces.

But all things must come to an end at last, and so did this journey which was no exception to the all-powerful rule.

Blake felt that he was being deposited upon a soft surface, a skin couch he supposed, and then for half an hour or so no one touched him, no one came near him, although to his acute senses, gagged as he was, it was perceptible that he was not alone, and, in some mysterious way, he got the idea that he was in an underground apartment of considerable extent.

About a half-hour elapsed, as we have said, thus

allowing Blake considerable time to speculate in regard to the strange things that had transpired, and then rude hands were suddenly laid upon him; the blanket was removed from his head; his weapons plucked from his person; the lariat removed from his feet, and a hoarse voice bade him get up.

He rose to his feet, somewhat slowly, for his limbs were rather stiff from the long and irksome confinement, and looked around him.

He was in a vaulted cavern fifty feet or more in diameter, one of these peculiar chambers due to volcanic action in a far-off age. The apartment was dimly lighted by candles clustered in bunches around circular sticks, each thus forming a sort of a torch.

Here and there in the walls of the vaulted chamber were great black cavities, evidently the entrances to other caves.

At one end of the apartment, upon a sort of rude stone throne, a tall, black figure was ensconced. Six other figures were in the room. All tall, all clad in long, black robes covering them completely, and through the head of each robe shone gleaming eyes.

Every man was armed with a cocked revolver. The chief alone excepted, and each and every revolver was leveled full at the breast of the prisoner, although his arms were tied, his weapons gone, thus destroying all hope of a successful resistance.

And as Blake looked upon the scene for the first time there flashed across his memory the remembrance of some wild tales which he had heard in regard to certain mysterious men who were supposed to infest the town of Tejon Camp, a silent band who worked by night in the dark like the old-time bravos, and with knife or pistol "removed" the men who were not wanted in the mining valley.

Blake had always regarded these stories as mere idle tales, the brain-coinage of boastful pilgrims who wanted to "stuff" the world with wondrous lies.

But here was the secret band and no mistake; there was no doubting the evidence of his own eyes.

And he was their prisoner; what fate did they intend for him?

"Do you know where you are, Jackson Blake?" asked the chief of the gang, who sat upon the throne-like rock. The speaker spoke slowly and solemnly, evidently endeavoring to disguise his voice and impart a tinge of awe to the scene, but the ears of the Fresh of Frisco had always been noted for their keenness, and so he felt sure that he recognized the speaker upon the instant.

"I do not," he replied to the question, betraying no sign of either surprise or recognition.

"Do you know who these men are that surround you?" the chief questioned again.

"A gang of amiable cutthroats, I should judge," Blake answered, as cool as a cucumber, and with not a trace of agitation upon his handsome face.

A sort of a hoarse, subdued growl came from under the black hoods. It was plain that these gentlemen of the night did not relish the plain speaking of the captive.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head or it may be the worse for you!" the chief exclaimed, sternly, and evidently annoyed by both the manner and matter of the speech. "You stand in the presence of the Black Men of Tejon. Few men ever look upon this scene and then live to tell of it."

A peculiar, ominous sound followed the warning. Each and every man lowered the hammer of his revolver down upon the cap, then clicked the cylinder round as if to make sure that the tool was in working order, and then raised the striker to full cock again.

But Blake, to use the old expression, didn't scare worth a cent; his clear, calm eyes glanced quietly around upon the masked men and a slight smile appeared upon his lips.

He had seen cocked and leveled revolvers before in his life, more of them too than his eye could take in now, and yet lived to tell of it.

"We rule this town—this valley, we Black Men of Tejon," the chief continued, "and all who dwell within our lines must obey our will or die—die a death of horrid torture, a hundred times more fearful than the instant death that knife or bullet can give."

Blake nodded; he perceived that he was expected to say something, but at present he preferred to play a "waiting" game; it was not his policy to force his adversary's hand.

"Those who rebel against our power perish miserably," the chief continued; "and now that you understand who and what we are, we desire to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead; I'm quite ready to answer."

"Your name is Jackson Blake, and sometimes you are called the Fresh of Frisco?"

"Yes, that is quite correct."

"What brings you to Tejon Camp?"

"A roving disposition, good my lord," replied Blake with an extremely polite bow.

"But you came here for some definite purpose?"

"Not a purpose!"

"You had better tell the truth, for if we catch you in a lie, heaven have mercy on your soul!" cried the masked leader in a hoarse voice.

"Oh, spare your threats; you can but kill!" exclaimed Blake, impatiently, "and I'm too old a gambler to worry much about my life at this late stage in the game."

"Reveal to us instantly the purpose which brought you into this camp or prepare to suffer! Remember that you are utterly in our power; we can either kill or torture, and the torture which we inflict is sometimes worse than death. Answer, I say: why do you come here?"

"To get my living," replied Blake, bluntly.

"To get your living in what way?"

"Why, in any way that lies open to me; I'll take a pan and try for gold, or I'll wield a pick for any man at fair wages. I'm open for anything that offers, and after the day's toil is done, I'll flip a card in any saloon, and with any man in the camp, for as much money as I can raise to back my game."

"But why did you seek this camp—why did you not go to other and richer diggings?"

"Because this was the first camp that came in my way, and as for the older towns at the north, I've been warned out of nearly every one of them, because I'm rather too quick with my pistol and altogether too lucky at cards to be permitted to hang around loose."

"Where did you make the acquaintance of Miguel Scott?"

"I don't know such a man."

"Oh, don't you? Bring out the red-hot irons; we'll apply them to your eyes, and as we burn out the sight perhaps your memory will be improved," the chief cried, with fiend-like savageness.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRIAL.

THE command was obeyed at once, for all had, apparently, been prepared.

Two of the disguised men retreated from the main cave and disappeared in one of the dark passages which seemed to be, in sober reality, entrances to the infernal region itself.

Blake had faced many perils in the course of his life of adventure and lived to tell of them, but now he seemed likely to come nearer to death than ever before.

No avenue of escape appeared open to him; he was helpless in the power of these men, and yet he did not despair, although few in this world have faced such danger with upright head.

But while there was life there was hope. There was no reason why these masked men should kill him. He had offended no one since coming to the Camp, with the exception of the bully whom he had defeated in a fair fight, and the disguised man had not referred to that quarrel at all; as for this Miguel Scott, about whom the outlaw leader seemed so anxious, to the best of his knowledge he had never met any such man, and the belief of the judge that he had, puzzled him greatly.

In a few moments the two men returned, bringing a small furnace, full to the brim with glowing coals, wherein a stout iron rod was stuck.

"Bring in the plank!" commanded the judge.

Two more men disappeared in one of the dark cavities and then immediately returned, bringing with them a heavy piece of plank about ten feet long. This they braced in an upright position against the rocky side of the cave.

"Now bind him to it!" the masked leader ordered.

The work was performed at once and with a skill which showed that the men were old hands at the business.

Blake did not attempt to resist; indeed, bound and helpless as he was, resistance would have been the height of folly.

"Let him smell the iron," commanded the outlaw chief, after Blake was securely fastened to the plank.

A hoarse, smothered chuckle came from under the hooded mask of one of the band as he took the iron rod—the end of which was heated red-hot—from the furnace, and with a flourish, poked it near enough to Blake's face to allow him to fully feel the heat.

Securely pinioned as he was, the prisoner could not resent the movement, although his blood fairly boiled in his veins, and he would willingly have given ten years of his life to have stood a free man, with his revolvers ready for use, in the center of the cave.

"You see that we are in dead earnest!" the judge exclaimed, grimly. "We mean business every time! Now, don't allow yourself to be deluded with the idea that this red-hot iron business is only a threat, and that we don't mean to carry through the whole operation, for we do. You never saw men more earnest in your life. You're a plucky fellow, but we've got the dead wood on you this time, and you might as well cave in and acknowledge the corn. Now, then, for the last time—we give you fair warning—will you answer the questions which I put to you, or shall I have you tickled with this red-hot plaything? And, mind you, if that thing ever fools around your eyes, they'll never be much good to you after it. Will you answer?"

"Certainly," responded Blake, very promptly; "I have n't refused to answer."

"Yes, you have!" cried the judge, tartly. "When I asked you about Miguel Scott you said that you did not know such a man."

"No more do I."

"Why you came to town with him to-night!"

"Nary a time!" replied Blake, tersely.

"You came into the Alcalde's Ranch together."

"Oh!" cried Blake, a light suddenly breaking in upon him—"you mean the young Californian whose part I took this evening?"

"Exactly, Miguel Scott."

"Well, that may be his name for all I know."

"Are you not acquainted with him?"

"Never saw him in my life before to-night."

The masked outlaw leader bent an earnest, searching gaze upon Blake, but he bore the scrutiny without flinching. He was speaking the truth, for there was no object in deception.

"You never saw him before to-night?" repeated the judge, slowly and deliberately.

"Never!"

"Take care! We Black Men of Tejon have ways and means for ascertaining the truth that you little dream of."

"I am speaking nothing but the truth," Blake replied, firmly.

The chief seemed puzzled. He hesitated for a few moments before he spoke.

"Blake," he said, at last, "you speak like a man who is telling the truth, but it seems incredible to me that you should involve yourself in a quarrel, wherein you put your life in peril, on account of a boy whom you now say is a total stranger to you."

"Well, judge, that's the kind of a man I am. Don't all the men that know me call me the Fresh of Frisco? and why should I bear such a name? Simply because I can't mind my own business. Too fresh—too eager to back other men's quarrels when I think that they have the right on their side and are being imposed upon. I saw that it was all a plan to rob the boy of his gold-dust. Luck had favored him and he had won largely; the monte-dealer called in force to take back what he had fairly lost."

"Why do you say the monte-dealer?" questioned the judge, harshly. "What had he to do with the quarrel? It was big Dave Mendoza who seized the dust and claimed it as his property."

"Well, judge, I reckoned that it was all in the family," Blake replied, shrewdly.

"It was no business of yours."

"No; but I tell you I can't help interfering when I see such goings on; the boy was alone, friendless in a den of thieves—"

"Take care! take care!" cried the masked judge, sternly. "You had better be careful what you are saying. We don't allow any such talk as that in this hyer Camp."

"Oh, this ain't a free country, eh?"

"If you stay in Tejon Camp you've got to keep your mouth shut."

"Well, I reckon that I won't stay in Tejon Camp, then!" Blake responded, dryly.

"We're all brothers hyer, and we stand shoulder to shoulder against outsiders. This young man was a stranger; he hadn't even got permission to stay in the Camp, and it's no part of our game to allow any strangers to come in and beat us at our own game."

And a man has got to get permission, then, before he can locate here?"

"Correct! this hyer Camp is the refuge for the oppressed. No matter what a man has done, he's welcome here so long as he agrees to abide by our laws; it don't matter a fig if his hands are red with the blood of a dozen men, he's welcome here, and once he is received within our Camp, we defy the power of all the sheriffs in California to take him out. We know no laws here except the ones we make ourselves, and whoever pitches his camp in this valley has got to yield obedience to those laws or we'll h'ist him out, mighty sudden. Alexander Black, the alcalde, rules the town, and we rule the alcalde, Alexander Black. We are the agents of death and destruction. When we get ready to put our mark on a man he might as well order his grave dug and pay for his tomb-stone. Now then we want to know where you stand; are you for or against us?"

"Judge, you are really too much for me. I'll have to give it up; give me an easier conundrum," Blake answered, not at all abashed by the threatening speech.

"Oh, you know what I mean, well enough, and we don't want any nonsense!" cried the judge, sternly. "We need just such men as you are. You're a bold fellow—too bold to stay in Tejon Camp unless you join us Black Men, for, if you are not one of us, this peculiar disposition of yours will most surely lead you to work against us; and we reckon that we ain't a-going to give you a chance to kick up any trouble. We've got you foul, now, and we don't propose to lose our grip. We thought that you were a pal of this Miguel Scott and we were going to settle your hash in short order, but since you ain't why we'll give you a good show. Come, what is it to be?"

"But, judge, this thing is so sudden," protested Blake, his shrewd wits perceiving a chance of escape.

"Oh, nonsense! You don't need a week to think it over."

"But give me some little time, though—until to-morrow say."

"Until to-morrow?" asked the judge, reflectively.

"Yes, and then if I can't see my way clear to join you, why I'll get out like a gentleman."

"Well, that will be as we shall decide," remarked the judge, in an extremely suggestive manner. "We don't generally give much choice to such men as you are; it's either join us or die."

"That ain't much choice, is it?" the prisoner observed, a quiet smile upon his face.

"You shall have until to-morrow morning, and then it's either join us Black Men of Tejon or die. Take him away!"

Two of the men stepped forward, unbound Blake from the plank and then led him away through one of the dark cavities.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CALIFORNIAN.

HARDLY had the figure of Blake disappeared when the judge made a signal to another brace of his masked cutthroats.

"Bring out the other one," he said.

The men obeyed the command at once, and from one of the dark passages they brought the young Californian, his arms securely bound and his weapons removed.

The second prisoner did not show the composure of the first, for his face was ashy pale, and he trembled visibly as he was brought into the judgment cave.

The eyes of the masked judge sparkled. Blake with his devil-may-care assurance had in a measure baffled him, but at the first glance he saw that the young Californian was no such man of ice and iron as the renowned sport; therefore he calculated that, though he had completely failed in impressing the soul of the Fresh of Frisco, he would have much less trouble with this white-faced, nervous boy.

"Well, young man, do you know where you are?" the judge questioned, in his gruffest tones.

"No, I do not," replied the youth, with an anxious glance around him.

"You are in the judgment cave of the Black Men of Tejon. We run this town, we do, and it's our business to question all strangers and learn what business brings them into our valley. Now we are going to question you, and I give you fair warning that you had better answer truthfully or else it may cost you dear. We have our spies abroad, and mighty few men get into this hyer camp without our knowing all about them and their business before they ever step foot in our streets."

Again the youth cast anxious glances around him, and his lips visibly trembled—signs of uneasiness which the judge noted with great satisfaction.

"We rule this camp with an iron hand," he continued. "No one within the limits of the Mohave valley dares to dispute our power. Were a man to even lift his little finger in resistance to our will, we'd give him to a death so sudden and terrible that men would talk with lated breath when they told of his untimely taking-off. And now, young man, that I have explained fully who and what we are, you will of course perceive that it is to your interest to answer our questions without reserve or concealment. Maybe you have some important business in this section of country—some *good* affair which you think concerns yourself alone? Now don't allow yourself to be misled on that point, for it is just possible that we know your business as well as you know it yourself, and perhaps better; so make a clean breast of it. We can give you valuable aid if we see that you are inclined to trust us; but if, on the contrary, you act against our will, and refuse our proffered friendship, the chances are just ten to one that we can baffle all your plans."

Again the youth cast restless, nervous glances around, and his lips trembled.

The judge laughed in his sleeve; his threats had had due effect and the boy was cowed already; but a pale face and trembling lips in some organizations are not always indicative of a weak or cowardly nature. The heart may be stout, although the flesh may not be strong.

"Now, then, your name is Miguel Scott?"

"No!" replied the youth, promptly, and a peculiar strange expression appeared upon his pallid face.

"Your name is not Miguel Scott?" cried the judge, in accents of amazement, astonished indeed at the plump denial.

"No, it is not!"

"Young man, we'll put you through a course of sprouts, before long!" threatened the masked man, enraged at the youth.

"I can't help it, sir; I am only speaking the truth," replied the youth, earnestly. "My name is not Miguel Scott, and I should be uttering a falsehood if I said that it was."

"Oh, perhaps my information was wrong, then? My spies possibly made a mistake, although they are generally very correct. What business brings you here, young man?"

"No particular business at all."

"But you must have some motive in coming to this camp?"

"To seek my fortune only; I understood that a man might do well here, that is all."

"Are you sure that that is all?" queried the judge, in an extremely sarcastic tone.

"I seek my fortune, nothing more, nothing less." The youth's stout heart and powerful will overcame the trembling flesh, and although the lips quivered, yet the words came out firmly.

"Ah, your fortune! and what may be your name, my young friend?"

The youth hesitated.

"Oh! trying to think of one, eh?" cried the judge.

"There may be reasons why I should not give my own," the boy replied, quietly, but evidently deeply excited.

"Reasons for denying that you are Miguel Scott, eh?"

"But I am not Miguel Scott!"

"Your name, then!" cried the judge, harshly. "Never mind what you have done; a confession here won't hurt you nor endanger your liberty. If you have killed a man or two, it don't matter; or robbed a bank, or a church; it's all one to us and we'll think the better of you for it, but for the last time I warn you not to attempt to deceive us or we'll take the most terrible vengeance that the mind of man can conceive or the hand of man execute. Be frank with us and we will aid you; treat us as foes and you had better never been born."

Again the slight figure of the youth, shook as though he had been seized by an ague fit, but the will—the indomitable will, remained firm.

"My name is James Blake," he said.

"Oh! a brother of our renowned friend, the Fresh of Frisco, eh?"

"No, no relation at all; I never even saw or heard of him until to-night."

And your business here is simply to seek your fortune?" the judge said, in a very amiable tone.

"Yes." The youth began to believe that his story was received as truth, but he was soon undeceived.

"Why then, young James Blake, did you visit the cabin of the drunken half-breed, Jose El Embustero? Why did he call you Miguel Scott and promise to aid you in your search for the buried treasures of your father, old Michael Scott, the cattle king?" exclaimed the judge, in a tone of thunder, rising and shaking his finger threateningly in the face of the youth.

"You are a villainous liar and must die the death of a dog for having attempted to deceive us after we had fairly warned you. Brothers he is yours!"

Each and every one of the masked men raised the hammer of his revolver and leveled the weapon full at the person of the young man. No word was spoken, but the ominous click of the locks rung through the vaulted cavern like the knell of doom.

The boy sunk upon his knees; the flesh yielded but the iron will which dwelt within the delicate frame, was still strong.

"Spare me!" he cried. "As there is a heaven above I swear that I speak nothing but the truth. I am not Miguel Scott; I never knew that there was such a person in this world—I never even heard the name until the half-breed pronounced it when I entered his cabin—the cabin of a stranger to me—to inquire my way."

"But you accepted the title; you accepted a bag of gold-dust from him to help you on your way."

"Because he forced it upon me and I sorely needed it," the youth replied, earnestly. "I told him I was not Miguel Scott—that I knew no one by that name, but he, like you, did not believe. He spoke at random about some treasures cached in the mountains, told me that I was the heir, and that I should have it. I believe that the man was raving, for he was deeply under the influence of liquor. I took his gold-dust because he forced it upon me, and I told him that I would repay the loan soon as I could. What would one do in such an extremity as I was placed in? Upon my life I am speaking the truth, and though your bullets tear my breast the moment my speech is done; still, with my dying breath I do declare that I am not Miguel Scott—nor do I know aught of him!"

Truth itself, if ever truth dwelt in human being, was in the voice and face of the speaker.

For a moment the judge was puzzled and then a brilliant idea flashed upon him.

"Take the prisoner back to his cave!" he cried. "For the present you are spared, but your trial will soon begin again. We have laid this half-breed Jose, the Liar, by the heels; we'll bring you face to face, and then we'll soon discover the truth. If you are Miguel Scott, beware! for you shall die a fearful death!"

CHAPTER XVI.

JOSE, THE LIAR.

In obedience to the commands of the chief of the denuded and hooded men the young Californian was removed from the center cave to one of the burrow-like holes that served as places of confinement for the prisoners of the secret band.

"Now, then, for the other!" the judge cried, when the two men returned. "Bring out Jose, the Liar, and give that furnace fire a poke some of you; we may have to try the hot-iron argument on this drunken red-man, for he's as cunning as a fox and as obstinate as a mule."

The two men at once departed to obey the command.

Along the right-hand side of the cavern, at irregular intervals, the dark mouths of three lesser apartments appeared. In the first, Blake had been placed, the second held the young Californian, and into the third the two men now went.

A special excursion had these Black Men of Tejon made to the abode of the peon Indian, and seizing him in his lonely hut in the mountains had bound him hand and foot, and then, placing him upon the back of a mule, had borne him a captive to the secret cavern, which was so near to the heart of Tejon Camp.

The old Indian had not attempted to resist the attack, but had submitted with a good grace. Possibly he thought that resistance would be fruitless and would only provoke harsher treatment.

The captors had placed the old peon in one of the cavern cells, slightly releasing the bonds which fettered his limbs, so that he could move about a little, and thus render his confinement less irksome.

"The Indian must speak," the masked judge observed, addressing the disguised man who stood close to him on his right hand, and who, evidently, was one of the principal men of the band. "He must speak," he repeated, fiercely, and with determined accent, "or else we will not only burn out his eyes but his tongue as well."

"There is no doubt in my mind that this boy is the son of Michael Scott," the other replied.

"Very little in mine, and yet he denies it strongly."

"Perhaps he fancies that not only his fortune but his life depends upon his denial of his identity," the other observed, his voice full of threatening meaning.

"He's not far wrong, eh?"

"Perhaps not."

The conversation at this point was suddenly interrupted by the return of the two men who had been sent to bring the Indian.

They came rushing back to the main cavern, waving their torches in wild confusion, and before they had opened their mouths one and all within the cave guessed at once that some untoward accident had occurred.

"Well, well?" cried the masked judge, in hoarse accents of command, as the two men paused breathlessly before him.

"The Injun!" shouted one.

"Clean gone!" ejaculated the other.

"Gone!" cried the chief, springing to his feet in utter amazement.

"Gone!" the band re-echoed, in vast astonishment.

"Durned ef he ain't!" the first ruffian answered.

"Nary piece of him left, hide nor ha'r," the second one chimed in.

"It is impossible!" the leader cried. "Mortal man could not escape from any one of the cells. There is no way of either getting into or out of them except by the single passage which leads into this center cave."

"Can't help it, Cap; the buck is clean gone!" the ruffian replied, with a dubious shake of the head. "He was thar all right at dark, for I took him in his fodder."

"Yes, I'll swar to that, for I see'd him, too!" the other masked officer exclaimed.

"Come with me, you two, and we'll examine the cell!" the chief exclaimed, hastily. "I cannot understand it at all. An escape under such circumstances seems like a miracle."

With hasty steps the three rushed into the narrow cave where the peon Indian had been placed.

The torches carried by the two guides fully illuminated the cavern, which was small in extent, not over ten or twelve feet wide and about twenty in length, very irregular in outline, more oval than square, and the walls broken into all sorts of curious shapes.

But the masked men noted not the peculiar beauty of this underground apartment, old nature's handiwork, for they had eyes only for one thing.

At the extreme end of the apartment, curled all up in a heap, apparently asleep, was a man.

The masked leader uttered an exclamation of rage as he looked upon the sleeper, and the two guides were so thoroughly astonished that they could only stare open-mouthed at the unexpected sight.

The sleeper was the Indian whom they had just declared had escaped.

"Why, you stupid dunderheads!" the judge cried, in a rage, "what did you mean by saying that you were not able to find him? Are you blind or so drunk that you can't see?"

"I'll take my oath he wasn't thar a min'te ago!" the first ruffian declared.

"I wish that I may be kicked to death by cripples ef he war thar!" the second one asserted.

"Bah! you couldn't have looked very carefully!" the judge retorted; "but, since you see that he is here, suppose you bring him along with you."

The two ruffians proceeded to rouse the sleeper from his slumber; and they were not particular as to the means they used, either, for while one laid a heavy hand upon the shoulder of the Indian and proceeded to shake him roughly, the other booted him in a most vigorous manner, and as a natural consequence the Indian sat up and proceeded to swear in an extremely fluent way.

"Hush yer yawp!" cried one of the men.

"Shet up, yer copper-colored nigger, you!" yelled the other. "How dar' you use good Christian cuss-words, you 'tarnel red heathen?"

"Git up and come along; the cap'n wants to see you."

"Me no want see capitun!" the Indian cried, in an aggrieved tone.

"Who the blazes cares whether you want to or not, yer red imp of mischief?" the first ruffian exclaimed, and he emphasized the remark with a hearty kick which made the red-man swear with wonderful ease.

But the Indian scrambled to his feet, evidently anxious to avoid another attack.

He was still hampered with the stout lariats with which he had been so securely bound, but, as the

cords had been loosened, he was enabled to move about with tolerable ease.

The two men conducted him into the central cave and placed him before the judge who had now resumed his seat.

In the full glare of the torches the person of the Indian could be plainly distinguished.

Jose, El Embustero—Jose, the Liar, to freely translate the title which local gossip had fixed upon the red chief—was a man of at least fifty years; a little, withered, dried-up sort of a man, strongly resembling an Egyptian mummy. He was a peon—a tame Indian—one of the red-men whom the holy Catholic fathers had converted in the early days when, with weapons both spiritual and carnal, the mission monks had exercised almost despotic sway over California.

As a general rule in this world when we civilize a barbarian he is much more apt to learn our vices than our virtues, and in the case of Jose, unless report grossly belied him, he had learned nothing but the vices of the white man who had essayed to tame him.

"Jose, we want a word or two of truth out of you!" cried the judge, sternly.

"Me tell truth all time," the peon responded, with a curious glance around at the masked men by whom he was surrounded.

"We intend that you shall tell us the truth or suffer," the judge replied. "Bring the furnace forward!"

In obedience to the command the fiery furnace with its mass of glowing red-hot coals was placed right at the peon's side.

"Now we mean business, Jose, every time," the judge remarked, "and we don't want any fooling. I'm going to ask you a few questions and the very first time you attempt to fool us with a lie we'll apply one of these hot irons to your eyes. Lie No. 1 we'll burn out the right eye; lie No. 2 we'll operate on the left one; lie No. 3 we'll give you a chance to taste it on your tongue."

The Indian trembled visibly as he listened to the terrible threat. He was a coward at heart; every one knew that, and it was not a wonder that he trembled when threatened with such a fearful ordeal.

"Me no lie," he murmured, humbly.

"You had better not!" the judge cried, harshly; "and now we want to know about this boy—this Miguel Scott."

The Indian took a single step forward, opened his mouth to reply and then—fell suddenly forward on his face, and at the same instant up from the furnace rolled a cloud of pungent, breath-stifling smoke, which, in a second, almost filled every nook and corner of the apartment. The men gasped, choked and swore.

"Down on your faces!" the judge roared, "or we will all stifle!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ESCAPE.

The timely suggestion of the masked chief proved the salvation of the disguised men, for, by throwing themselves flat upon their faces, they were enabled to breathe with comparative ease, for the strange vapor which had arisen so suddenly, and in such a mysterious way, from the furnace, obeyed the stringent law of nature and floated toward the roof of the cavern.

So dense was the vapor-like smoke, that even the blazing torches failed to make an impression upon it, and like lights burning in a fog, were walled in by leaden gloom.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked the disguised man, who had stood by the side of the masked judge, and who, in throwing himself upon the floor, had still kept near to the chief.

"The fiend only knows!" the judge replied, angrily.

"Do you suppose that the Indian had anything to do with it?"

"Perhaps," and then a sudden thought flashed over the speaker's mind. "Why, it is a thousand to one that he produced it."

"Produced it! How?"

"Cast some drug into the furnace; these peons are skilled in herbs and roots, and I have often heard that this Jose was a mighty medicine-man; the cunning rascal has overreached us."

"But I do not understand—what can he gain by this trick?"

"Liberty; he saw that we were disposed to push him to the quick, and as he was not able to oppose force he tried what cunning would effect. This is an old cave, you know; it was here when the town was first settled; it is evidently an old mine, for it bears marks of having been worked; no white men though ever had a hand in it; it is one of the secret mines of the Indians, for the very entrance to it even is carefully hidden, and it was only by accident that I stumbled upon it, and I have kept the knowledge of the mountain passage within my own breast. I caused the underground way to the Alcalde's Ranch to be constructed, for I saw how useful the cavern would prove. Now it is just possible that this lying scamp of a red-skin knows all the ins and outs of the cave much better than I do. If you remember, when the men went to fetch him a minute or so ago he was not there, and when I went myself and saw him lying curled up on the floor, I believed that they had carelessly overlooked him, although I could not very well understand how they could do such a thing. They protested stoutly that they had used their eyes as well as they knew how, and that when they had gone the first time the cell was empty. Of course I cursed them for a couple of careless rascals, but I am satisfied now that they spoke the truth. The peon was not there. He knows some secret passage which leads from that little cave. It is probable that, in the old time, this cavern was not only a mine but served as a place of refuge for the red-men in the time of danger, and that is the reason why all the winding passages, which apparently lead nowhere—the end being barred by the solid rock—were constructed. Each and every one had some secret outlet skillfully constructed, and so cunningly arranged as to baffle the most searching eyes. You have followed me in this!"

"Yes, and you think the Indian, perceiving that you intended to force the secret of Miguel Scott from him, resolved to escape rather than betray the son of his old master?"

"Exactly; he has taken advantage of the dark

ness which he produced by casting some drug into the furnace fire, to escape, and the chances are a thousand to one that already he is far beyond our reach."

"The vapor is losing its force; soon we will know the truth."

Such was the fact; the peculiar smoke, so pungent in its character, was slowly fading away, and breathing was no longer oppressive.

"Suppose that the Indian has escaped?"

"We hold the boy, though; and this desperate sharp, who is so handy with both his tongue and his weapons," the judge replied, and there was a menace in his tone which boded no good to either the Californian, or to the outspoken Fresh of Frisco.

The vapor grew thinner and thinner, the light of the torches began to again illuminate the dark recesses of the cavern, and like so many dark and horrid reptiles the prostrate Black Men of Tejon lifted up their heads and glared around them.

The judge was right; no Indian was to be seen; the peon had taken advantage of the vapor to wriggle away in the darkness. It was quite plain that El Embustero was no stranger to the secrets of the cavern.

Again the disguised men stood upon their feet and blinked in each other's faces like so many owls, brought suddenly from darkness into light.

These bold, rough men, desperadoes of the worst type, equally reckless of their own lives and of the lives of others, suddenly comprehended that they had escaped, as it were, from the very shadow of death. They understood that, if the Indian had used double the quantity of powder that he had cast upon the furnace fire, not a man in the room would have escaped to tell the tale, but that one and all would have perished by suffocation. There were white faces then under the black hoods, and drunken Jose, the Liar, suddenly became exalted into a foe of no mean ability.

The judge resumed his place upon the rocky throne.

"Bring out both the boy and the man," he commanded. "We have no time to spare now, for morning is not far off, and we must get to the bottom of this business before day breaks."

The officers departed to carry out the orders, but in a few seconds they came rushing back in amazement.

"Both are gone!" they cried.

"Gone!" exclaimed the chief, and the rest of the gang re-echoed the words.

It was plain that this was destined to be a night of surprises.

Hurriedly the chief proceeded to examine the cave cells in person, trusting to find the pair asleep in some corner, as, but a short time previous, he had discovered the peon.

But the search was a fruitless one, this time. Not the slightest trace of either one could be found. Both the Californian and the adventurer had disappeared, and as mysteriously as though they had melted into the solid rock.

The masked men searched high and they searched low; every hollow passage in the cells, big enough to allow a rabbit to go through, they tried, but if there was a secret outlet, and there was very little doubt that one did exist somewhere, it was too cunningly contrived to be discovered by mortal eyes.

Baffled in their search the masked men returned to the main cavern and there held a consultation, the result of which the reader will see anon.

And now we will return to the two prisoners and relate the manner of their escape from their prison-pens.

Blake, after his interview with the chief of the Black Men, upon being conducted to his cell again, immediately began to prepare himself to pass the night in comfort, for a true son of the border was he, and no matter how rough the accommodations he always endeavored to make the best of them.

Hardly had he camped himself down in a snug corner of the cave when he was suddenly astonished by hearing a slight noise as though a heavy body had jumped lightly to the ground from some considerable height, but, whether animal or human, he knew not.

His doubts were soon solved, though, for with a stealthy step the thing approached him, evidently able to see in the dark, and Blake braced himself for a struggle.

"No hurt white man—me friend!"

In a hoarse whisper came the words, and extremely reassuring was the sentence, too.

"Well, I want friends just now, if ever a man did," Blake replied.

"You friend—Miguel Scott, eh?" questioned the mysterious stranger.

"If by Miguel Scott you mean that young Californian, I think I can answer safely that I am his friend, for I like the lad, and I would go out of my way to do him a service."

"You no want to stay here, eh?"

"Not much!" replied Blake, emphatically.

"S'pose I gette you out, you fight for Miguel Scott, eh?" questioned the voice, anxiously.

"Yes, that's a bargain; you get me out and I'll stand up for the boy like a brother."

"Good! Me gette you out!"

"But, who are you?"

"Jose, the Liar! Wait, me come back soon."

And then Blake heard the sound of retreating footsteps, followed by a peculiar sound as though the man were scrambling up the side of the wall. Then all was still.

"Jose, the Liar, eh?" Blake muttered. "I hope on this occasion, though, my gentle friend will belie his name."

Blake waited in patience, and at last his vigil was rewarded.

As the chief of the masked men had conjectured, the Indian did throw a powdered drug upon the furnace fire, thus producing the vapor; then under cover of the gloom, he had glided away, entered the cave-cell where Blake was confined, released him from the pinions which bound him and instructed him how to scale the side of the cave, to the secret passage, the entrance to which was some eight feet from the floor. Then he conducted him straight to the cave where the Californian was confined, freed the lad from the lariats which bound him, and then plunging into another secret passage, led the way to the outer air, and after some fifteen or

twenty minutes' walk, through the underground passages, came out on the mountain-side in a little grove of shrubby pines, high up above the town of Tejon Camp, which was plainly visible to the eyes of the three, bathed in the rays of the pale moonlight afar down in the valley.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COMPACT.

For the first time the escaped prisoners looked upon the face of their rescuer, Jose, the peon—Jose, the Liar—who possessed such a wonderful knowledge of the secret passage of the underground judgment-hall of the Black Men of Tejon.

The old Indian, scantily clad, with his long black hair streaming down upon his shoulders from under his ragged-edged sombrero, looked like anything but a hero, but there was no disputing the fact that the peon, with his cunning trick, aided by his wonderful knowledge of the underground passages, had saved the lives of the two captives.

"Well, old fellow, you have done us a good turn, to-night!" Blake exclaimed. "I say us," he continued, turning to the Californian, "for I presume that you were in a tight place, too?"

"Indeed I was," the youth replied, frankly, "and I trust that it will be many a long day before I come so near to death as I have been this night."

"I for one won't forget it, my red friend," Blake observed, "and the day may come when I can repay the service. If it ever does, rest assured you may command me, even to the shedding of the last drop of blood within my veins."

No heedless speech or empty boast was this. The Fresh of Frisco meant every word of it, and he was one of that kind of men who made good their word with their blood.

"And I, sir, owe you a debt of gratitude no less great than this gentleman!" the youth cried; "and I, too, am willing at any time to risk my life to pay the debt."

The old Indian wagged his head in a very peculiar way.

"Me no want nothing, nohow," he replied. "Me, long time ago, Michael Scott man—no forget cattle-king of Buenaventura. See! his face live again here!" and the Indian pointed to the youth. And this was really a wonderful stretch of the imagination, for there could be but very little resemblance between the young, smooth-faced boy and the grim, old, bearded cattle-king of Buenaventura.

The dark eyes of the youth glistened and he made an impatient gesture.

The Indian misunderstood the youth.

"Be no 'fraid!' he cried; "he friend," and he pointed to Blake. "Big chief—fight for you; you need heap friend to fight ladrones dere," and with his skinny fore-finger the red-man pointed down the mountain-side to where the quiet town of Tejon Camp lay sleeping in the moonlight.

"This gentleman is a stranger to me," the Californian remarked, a peculiar expression upon the olive-tinted, resolute face. "Already he has ventured his life in my quarrel, and to ask him to do more would be to place myself under a weight of obligation which in the future might crush me to the very ground."

"Your life Jose save!" the Indian exclaimed, forcibly, shaking his skinny fore-finger at Blake. "What for you do for *dal*, eh?"

"Anything you like!" the Fresh replied, on the instant.

"You fight for him if I say so, eh?" and Jose pointed to the Californian.

"To the death!" Blake answered, promptly.

"It is good; your fadder was my master," said the Indian, addressing the youth. "Old Jose live to be a thousand years he nebbor forget old cattle-king."

"But my name is not Miguel Scott; I am not the son of the cattle-king of Buenaventura; you are laboring under a delusion!" the youth exclaimed, evidently the prey of strong excitement.

The Indian wagged his head sagely. It was quite plain that the denial of the youth had no more effect upon him than the whisper of the breeze sighing through the pines of the mountain side.

"That is right," he muttered, with a cunning leer; "your secret—hide it tight—tell it not even to the winds, for who knows when it may be betrayed? Old Jose know it—this North American, he know it—no one else. Good! You need money. Jose know where the gold lies hid in the mountain pocket. He know, too, where, in the heart of the mountain, the old cattle-king cached his treasures. When old red-beard die Jose will speak," and the peon pointed down into the valley, thus plainly indicating that by old red-beard he meant Alexander Black, the alcalde of Tejon Camp.

"What has his death to do with the secret?" the Californian demanded, in wonder.

The Indian shook his head, put his finger upon his lips as if to entreat silence, and then with a guttural "good-by," shook both their hands and glided away into the forest, vanishing amid the pines like a specter.

Blake and the Californian looked at each other in amazement.

"A little touched in the upper story, eh?" suggested the Fresh.

"It would seem so," the Californian replied.

"Well, crazy or not, he has done us a good turn this night, and I will not forget it if the chance ever comes for me to return the service. I've learned a thing or two in the last few hours. These Tejon Camp cutthroats have caught me napping once but they will never get a second opportunity."

"And so say I!" exclaimed the youth; "and yet I must brave their power whether I will or no, for I have business in yonder Camp, and I must pursue it even at the risk of life."

"Well, my friend, what say you now: shall we go on together or separate here and say good-by?" Blake asked, regarding the youth with an earnest, inquiring look.

"That is as you say."

"As I say, eh?" Blake repeated, reflectively.

"You know the Californian custom, I suppose?"

"I am not sure that I understand to which one you refer."

"Why, in this wild, rude land two men come together, by accident or by design; they become companions, partners, brothers; and oftentimes the tie thus hastily formed is as enduring as one as that

cemented by blood relationship. And now, what say you—shall we be partners, brothers, each for the other and both for one?"

A painful expression swept over the olive-tinted face.

"Oh! but it is not right to drag you into my quarrel!" the youth exclaimed. "I come on a desperate mission, and in attempting to gain the end I seek I shall undoubtedly rouse against me all the ruffianly villains of this camp of outlaws!" and as he spoke the Californian shook his clenched fist at the sleeping town below. "Already you have put your life in peril on my account; why, then, should I seek to embroil you further? Why not attempt to tread my own dangerous life-path alone, and then, if I fail in my design, and perish by the hands of these wild and desperate men, no life but my own will be sacrificed?"

"You are, then, Miguel Scott, the son of this old cattle-king of Buenaventura, and you seek the secret treasure hidden in the mountains, in regard to which the old Indian spoke; and, if I guess the situation rightly, this alcalde of Tejon Camp is also after the treasure, and that is the reason why the attack was made upon us to-night in the Alcalde's Ranch," Blake said slowly.

"I am not Miguel Scott, but I do seek the hidden treasure, and I have as good a right to it as any one!" the Californian replied, firmly.

"Well, partner, I might as well take a hand in the fun, for I am already mixed up in the affair, and I shall probably have to do my share of the fighting, anyway."

"Since you will take my quarrel upon your back, join me, then!" and the youth extended his hand, impulsively, as he spoke.

The two clasped hands and the big, round moon, high above in the heavens, witnessed the compact.

"And now, if you choose, I can bring to your assistance some good, stout fellows who will be more than a match for double their number of these Tejon Camp bullies," Blake remarked.

"You can?" and the Californian opened his eyes in wonder.

"They are black sheep, every one of them, but we must fight fire with fire."

"No matter who or what they are, so long as they will back my quarrel and help me to fight these villains of this robber town!"

"The men I speak of have a haunt in the mountains only a few miles from here," Blake explained. "They are outlaws, every man of them; not a living soul in the band but for whom an outraged law is reaching."

"I care not so long as they fight my battles for me, and if I succeed I will make every man of them rich beyond their wildest dreams."

"But one thing I had forgotten," Blake added.

"Well, what is it?"

"It will be necessary for you to join the outlaw band, or otherwise I cannot trust you with the secret of their mountain retreat."

"I will join them," the Californian answered, promptly. "What care I? If I win my fight, I shall be rich enough to give them a fortune apiece, and if I understand human nature aright, the band will dissolve immediately when each member has money enough to seek a civilized home, either in this land or another; and if I fail, I shall probably meet my death at the hands of my brutal foes, and then what matter oaths and secrets to me?"

"You reason shrewdly; and with the aid of my Wolves I think the chances are ten to one that you will win!" Blake cried, impressed with the spirit of the youth. "And now, let's be off, for we have some miles to cover. You have faced the Black Men of Tejon to-night; now try the Wolves, and see if they won't treat you better!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STORY OF THE FRESH.

The two set out on their way; oddly-mated companions, the strapping Californian, with his delicate, effeminate manners, and the resolute, dare-devil Fresh of Frisco, man of ice and iron.

Well was it for the youth, though, if he sought the hidden treasures of Buenaventura, the buried wealth of old Michael Scott, the cattle-king, that he had secured so strong an ally as Jackson Blake.

Along the mountain-side, following a trail, almost imperceptible except to the eyes of a man well versed in woodcraft, the pair proceeded.

"I am tolerably familiar with this mountain-side," Blake explained, as they walked along. "for this old Indian trail leads directly from the Mohave valley, where Tejon Camp is situated, right past the entrance to the lair of the Wolves, but I had no idea of the existence of this vast underground passage through which we have passed to-night."

"Is this organization of which you are a member, and which you term The Wolves, a band similar to that of the Black Men of Tejon?" asked the Californian.

"Somewhat, and yet altogether different in this respect: these fellows, from whom we escaped to-night, are evidently the tools of the alcalde of Tejon Camp, Alexander Black, while the Wolves are like the old freebooters of ancient story. They are gentlemen who have had, at different times, sundry disputes with the officers of the law, and for whom the atmosphere of civilization is not particularly healthy. Mind you, I am not excusing the crimes of these men; they are wild, desperate, lawless fellows, quick to handle the knife or pistol, determined to live and live well, no matter who pays the cost. I, too, like these men, am an outcast; no outraged law reaches for me, though. I have merely defied the rough, rude customs of the border camps. I am a gambler by profession simply because I have marvelous skill in that line, and I can make money easier in that way than by any other."

"But do you like such a life?" cried the Californian, abruptly. "Is it not a mean, miserable way of getting a living? Would it not be better to toil as a miner, getting your bread by honest labor, wrestling the golden grains from the sand and the rocks, rather than by fleecing simple fools by means of the painted pasteboards?"

The speech was a strange one, rapidly delivered and with extraordinary force.

Blake opened his eyes in amazement. He had heard some pretty plain speeches during the past year, when he had so rapidly progressed southward from the Golden Gate, "passed" from town to

town, from camp to camp, by terse-spoken vigilance committees, whose parting words were wonderfully alike: "You've been hyer too long—you're too fresh—git up and dust!"

And the sport had never attempted to argue the "p'int": he had "got up and dusted" at once.

"Well, you're putting your side of the case pretty strongly," Blake remarked, placed upon the defensive by the attack.

"Have I not stated the truth?"

"The truth as it appears to you."

"Yes, as it appears to me, and must appear to any honest person," the youth replied.

Blake winced; the words cut home.

"And yet, bad as I am—bad as my companions are, you are willing to accept our aid to help you fight your battles."

"One must use such tools as one can find," the Californian replied. "Besides, if I am to judge the rest by you, I could find far worse men in this world. You are a brave and generous man, or else you would not take my part and offer to assist me against foes whom few men in this world would care to brave if the task could be avoided; but this life that you lead is unworthy of such a man as you are; am I, then, wrong in advising you to abandon

Blake was considerably astonished at the youth, whose words went as straight to the point as an arrow to the mark discharged by a skillful archer.

"Yes, but listen to my side of the case!" he exclaimed. "There can be more than one aspect to some things in this world, for it depends sometimes very much how you look at a thing. Do you remember the old story of the shield about which the knights fought? One declared that it was black, and the other that it was white, and after the battle was ended, and they had fought until they could fight no more, they examined the article, and lo! it was black on one side and white on the other."

"I cannot see how there can be two sides to the life which you pursue."

"Because you don't know anything about it," replied Blake, bluntly. "Let me show you what my life has been, from my standpoint. I had trouble in the East and was forced to fly to the West. Now, don't misunderstand me," he added, quickly, perceiving a peculiar expression gathering upon the features of his companion. "I don't want to make a hero of myself, but truth is truth, and since I am going to justify my deeds I must tell of the good as well as of the bad. I must tell you all or nothing."

"I was left an orphan at an early age and from the time that I was eight years old I have fought the world on my own account. I got along very well, too, considering that I had no one to aid me, or to speak a good word for me. When I was about twenty-five I had a good position in a bank—was trusted and respected by all. One day the president, just as we were closing up business for the day, called me into his private office and informed me that there was something wrong in the affairs of the bank, and that, in brief, he was afraid some one of the officers had proved recreant to the trust reposed in him; his faith in my honesty and capabilities being strong he requested me, in company with the oldest officer of the bank—a gentleman with whom I boarded—to remain after hours and carefully examine the books so as to detect, if it was possible, the culprit. The old gentleman—I will call him Mr. Smith, names matter not—and myself, after the bank closed, set about our task. I had been a member of Smith's family about five years; he had quite a large family, and there had sprung up a love-affair between his eldest daughter and myself—not a very serious one, but yet enough to justify the belief that in time we would be married."

"Smith and I commenced our examination and I noticed that he seemed strangely nervous and agitated, but I had no idea, even when I saw how unnerved he was, that he was the man who had robbed the bank. But it was so, and in a short half-hour I detected the false entries by means of which he had covered up his crime. The old man went down on his knees before me and begged me for the sake of his family, as well as for the many acts of kindness which he had shown to me, not to expose him. The story of his crime was the old, old tale. He had been tempted to speculate—had become involved beyond his means and had taken the bank's funds to aid him to retrieve his losses, but when a man once gets involved in the whirl of speculation it is pretty sure to end by swallowing him up. He had only taken a small sum, too, a couple of thousand dollars, but he was utterly unable to make it up and I only had about five hundred dollars of my own. There was but one way out of the difficulty. It was useless to attempt to cover the matter up, for if I had reported that I could not discover who the thief was, an expert would have been called in, and, inside of twenty minutes, he would have traced the guilt home. The matter lay between Smith and myself; it was either he or I. Now, what was to be done?"

"You took the old man's guilt on your shoulders!" the Californian exclaimed, instantly—a strange, peculiar light shining in his brilliant black eyes.

Blake laughed.

"Well, you're right for once in your life if you never were before. I did! I saved the old man at the expense of my own reputation. I altered the figures in the books so that it would appear as if the false entries were my work. I took two hundred dollars out of the petty cash to help me on my way, turned over my bank-book to the bank, wrote the president a brief note, stating that I had fallen into temptation, but that I would make the money good as soon as I could, tied Smith hand and foot and gagged him, so that it would be plain that he was not my confederate, and then fled like a thief in the night."

"In truth, I was not sorry to get away, for the wild demon of unrest possessed me and I hungered for the wild, free life of the frontier. I had always been an expert with cards and I knew that I could make a living even among the sharps of the gold-land. I came out here, but an evil fortune seemed to follow me. Fate willed that I should become involved in quarrels—fate willed, thanks to my quick eyes and ready hands, that I should kill the men who sought to kill me. Soon I acquired an evil name. The Fresh of Frisco was politely passed from camp to camp until I found myself reduced to herd with the outlaws of Tejon Camp. I am a gambler—a card-sharp, but I defy any man to say that I ever

bantered a greenhorn to play! Oh, no! the sharps who live on the pilgrims are my mutton, and if I fleece them is it anything more than dog eat dog?"

"No, you are right; you are not as bad as I thought; but still it is a miserable life!" the youth replied, slowly.

"Show me the way to a better one and see how quickly I'll grasp the chance."

"I will, some day, if I live, and mind, I shall hold you to your promise!" the Californian exclaimed, quickly, the olive-hued face lighting up with a glad expression.

"Halt!" cried Blake, pausing in front of a massive belt of pines. "We are near our journey's end, and you must submit to be blindfolded, for until you pass through the ordeal which the Wolves exact, I cannot trust you with the secret of the stronghold."

CHAPTER XX.

THE HAUNT OF THE WOLVES.

"BLINDFOLD me?"

"Yes," Blake replied, "and I must give you fair warning that the ordeal through which you will have to pass is no light one, but if you seek the aid of the Wolves it will be necessary to join the band. Of course, as far as I am concerned, there is no compulsion about the matter. I will aid you—will do anything in my power for you, but I cannot bring the band to your assistance without you join their ranks."

"Let me fully understand the matter," the Californian observed, after a moment's thought. "Who commands this band, do you? Are you the master of the Wolves?"

"To reveal that fact to you would be to betray one of the secrets of the band," Blake declared.

"But, how then, if you are not the master of the Wolves can you bring them to aid me in my fight with the wretches of Tejon Camp?"

"You are as inquisitive as a woman!" the sport exclaimed, with a laugh. "I cannot very well satisfy your curiosity now, but when you have become better acquainted with me, you will be able to say, with perfect confidence, that Jack Blake never yet broke faith with either friend or foe."

"I will trust you!" the Californian announced, with a kindling eye; "I will trust you with both my life and fortunes."

"And if I prove false to my trust, shoot me on sight the next time you meet me, and I promise you I will not raise a finger to defend myself."

"Blindfold me, at once; I am eager to enter upon my task!" the youth cried, impetuously.

"It will be a terrible ordeal!"

"I do not shrink from it."

The face of Blake plainly showed that he was impressed with the courage of the stripling.

From his waist Blake unwound the gaudy sash which belted in his sinewy frame, and then carefully bound it over the eyes of the youth. No cobweb bandage was this through which the wearer could distinguish the objects that surrounded him, but a muffling that effectually shut out the world.

"Now give me your hand; follow and fear not," the Fresh said, and as he spoke he grasped the slender palm of the youth, the little brown hand, small enough, and dainty enough, to be a woman's pride and boast.

There was a wonderful difference between the strong, muscular hand of Blake, firm as iron, almost, in its texture, and as chilly to the touch as a piece of lifeless metal, and the warm, pulsating palm of the Californian; and as the hands touched, a thrill passed through the slight form of the youth.

Instinctively, almost, Blake felt the sensation.

"Does my hand chill you?" he asked. "Folks generally say that it is like a lump of ice."

"Yes, it is cold."

"It is an honest tool, though, and has served its owner well in many a desperate emergency."

"A cold hand betokens a warm heart, they say," the Californian observed.

"Faith! if the rule be true, and works as true by contraries, then you must have a deuced cold heart, for your fingers are as warm as toast."

"I have a warm heart to my friends, as you shall find one of these days, but a bitter cold one to my enemies."

With steady steps the Californian followed in the footsteps of Blake.

Bereft of the use of one sense, the others seemed unnaturally on the alert. The youth could distinguish that he was passing through a narrow passage in the shrubbery, then his feet commenced to tread a rocky pathway, and from the damp and confined nature of the surrounding air, he became sensible that he was proceeding through some underground passage, the entrance, no doubt, to the cavern of the Wolves.

A few minutes more and then the smell of smoking torches greeted the Californian's nostrils; the main hall of the cavern evidently was reached.

"Remain here a few moments," said Blake, in a loud tone, and then he added, hurriedly, in the ear of the youth: "Keep up a bold heart and fear not!"

And then, relinquishing his grasp of the Californian's hand, Blake hastened away.

The youth remained motionless; cool and collected, though; fully prepared to undergo the ordeal before him.

About five minutes he waited and then heavy footsteps sounded behind him; the bandage which covered his eyes was suddenly removed and again he had free use of his vision.

The youth looked around him.

He was in a circular shaped cavern of great size; in the center a huge fire burned, and this it was that gave out the smoke which the youth had imagined had come from torches.

The blaze from the fire amply lighted up the cave. A huge table, roughly constructed from hewn logs and slabs occupied one end of the cavern, and on this table a hunter's banquet was spread: a haunch of venison, ribs of bear; a bird-pie, cooked in a big tin pan, like an English wild-wood dish of the old Robin Hood time; large platters of pan-cakes, the miner's stand-by; and for wine the tables boasted a fine array, from the slender fluted vintage of the Rhine to the beakers of champagne.

And for drinking vessels, cups of solid gold had these mountain outlaws, evidently prey wrested from some gold-burdened ranchero of the Mexican border.

And the lords of this cavern—of this banquet—of this strange scene, something akin to the old legend of the Norse gods feasting in Walhalla?

Seven muscular, well-armed men, nearly all of them huge-bearded fellows dressed in true mountain fashion, and with the upper part of their faces covered by a little black mask, through which shone their glittering eyes.

Five of the men sat in a circle around the fire, which blazed in the center of the cavern; and the sixth man was the one who had removed the bandage, and he was evidently the officer who attended to the initiation of new members, for, after removing the scarf, he took a position by the side of the candidate. The seventh man was plainly the captain of the band, for he occupied a seat apart from the rest, mounted upon a rocky throne. He too, like nearly all the rest, wore a flowing beard, jet black in color, as was also the long hair which streamed down over his shoulders.

The chief was fully armed, and before him on the rocky ledge behind which he sat was a pair of revolvers. He also wore a mask.

The youth looked around with an eager gaze; he thought that he would be able to recognize Blake despite the mask, but his scrutiny was in vain; not a single one of the men seemed to resemble the Fresh of Frisco in the least.

"What do you desire?" asked the chief in a hoarse, deep tone, evidently disguised.

"To join your band."

"Why do you wish to join the Wolves?"

"Because I need the aid of strong, bold men."

"And why should we join in your quarrels?"

"Because you stand to win a good round sum in gold if I succeed."

The Wolves pricked up their ears at this.

"Suppose you fail in your undertaking, what shall we gain?"

"Nothing but hard knocks."

"Do you understand what the conditions of joining our band are? Do you know that we shall require you to aid us in our schemes, no matter whether you like it or not?"

"Yes, I understand all that."

"And you are willing to comply?"

"Yes, or I would not be here."

"Who vouches for you?"

"Jackson Blake."

"Let Blake step forward."

Not a man moved.

"Aha!" cried the chief, sharply, "your voucher does not seem anxious to appear."

"He vouches for me all the same, though."

"Young man!" exclaimed the chief, suddenly and roughly, "we know you and the object that brings you here. We have our spies in Tejon Camp as well as elsewhere. Alex. Black, the alcalde of Tejon Camp, has hired you to come here and join our band so as to betray our secret haunt in the mountains to him. You have played a bold game but it won't work; I'll give you just five minutes to confess, say your prayers, if you care to, and then may Heaven have mercy on your soul!"

The chief took up one of the revolvers, cocked it, and took deliberate aim at the unprotected breast of the youth.

The Californian merely smiled.

"If this is one of your tests, you may save yourself the trouble," he observed, quietly, "for I know that it is not the truth, and so do you."

"Confess! The five minutes are nearly up," cried the outlaw chief, threateningly.

"I have nothing to confess."

"Perhaps I have been misinformed," said the chief, slowly, dropping the muzzle of the revolver, "and since you seem to be true blue, why, we'll give you a chance. Bring out the goblet and administer the oath to him!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OATH.

ONE of the men by the fire arose and as he advanced toward the Californian, drew from his girdle the broad-bladed, keen-edged hunting-knife which he wore.

"Now then, young man, remember that this oath which you are about to take—the oath of the Wolves—must be sealed by blood; but as we always act fairly and squarely with all who wish to join our ranks, we now give you to understand that once this oath is taken, from that moment you become one of the Wolves of Tejon, and pledged to obedience to orders given even though to carry out the commands would render certain the death of your own brother."

"I have none," said the youth, grimly, "neither brother nor sister, father nor mother, nor any other relative! I am utterly alone in the world."

"The oath once taken you are ours forever, but it is not yet too late to retrace your steps," the chief continued. "You have entered our stronghold, but as yet you know nothing of our secrets; you are at liberty to retreat now if you wish to, merely giving us your solemn promise that you will never betray to mortal soul what your eyes have witnessed here. Do not decide hastily—take time to reflect; remember that it is no idle thing that you are about to do, and that the word once given can never be recalled."

"I do not desire time," the Californian replied at once, and without a moment's hesitation. "I have fully considered the matter and am ready to join your band immediately. Do not waste time but proceed to the oath. I am about to give each one of you a chance to make a small fortune for himself, and if I fail in the attempt, why then, the quicker I go into my grave the better."

"Administer the oath," the chief commanded.

The outlaw tendered the youth the broad-bladed knife.

"Take the knife in your right hand and elevate the blade," he said. "Repeat the oath after me!—I hereby swear by all that I hold sacred in this world—by all my hopes of a hereafter, or my fears of an eternal home in everlasting flames—never to betray the secrets of the band of brothers known as the Wolves of Tejon—one of whom by taking this oath I now become. I swear to humbly and religiously obey any and all orders given me by the Master Wolf; to stand by my brothers to the death in the hour of danger; to risk life and limb to save a brother from peril, and if I prove craven-hearted in the hour of need—if I show the white feather in the fight—if I fly and leave my brothers when assailed—

"If I do not carry out the orders given me—if I betray the secrets of the Wolves, then may swift and terrible death be my portion; may I be rent, limb from limb, by the wild beasts of the woods; may the sneaking, snarling coyotes of the prairie gnaw my bones as they bleach in the sun; the earth refuse to receive my body and all things conspire together to cry aloud to the world—Behold the remains of a traitor!"

In a firm, distinct voice the Californian repeated the oath, sentence by sentence, as it fell from the lips of the brawny outlaw. If there was any trace of fear or apprehension in his heart it did not appear upon his face.

"Kiss the blade of the knife and remember that either cold steel, hot lead, or the hangman's rope will be your fate, if you betray your brother Wolves!" exclaimed the administrator of the oath.

Coolly and deliberately the youth touched his lips to the blade of the knife.

"Now bring forth the goblet of blood—the warm and living blood, and let him drink success to the Wolves!" the chief commanded.

Despite his firm nerves an expression of disgust passed rapidly over the face of the youth; it was quite plain that he did not relish this test; but, in a firm, resolute way he shut his lips tightly together, as though he was determined not to shrink from this last ordeal.

From the banquet table the outlaw, who had acted as master of ceremonies, brought one of the massive golden goblets, and as he approached, the Californian saw that it was filled to the brim with blood.

It was not a pleasant sight, and even the firm-nerved, resolute seeker-after-fortune felt that his face was growing white, and that a strange sensation of nausea was rising within his frame, and it required the use of all his wonderful nerve to enable him to grasp the goblet.

"Turn round sideways, so that I can have a good look at you!" the chief exclaimed.

The Californian obeyed, but he felt that his head was in a whirl, and he doubted whether he should be able to accomplish the feat, for to his delicate senses there was something terribly repugnant about the ordeal.

"Now then, drink!" the chief commanded.

Setting his teeth firmly together and bending every nerve to the effort, the youth raised the goblet, while the outlaws looked on with curious eyes; many a one of the stout fellows there had shrunk from the test.

Half-way up the youth carried the goblet, his face deathly white, when, suddenly through the apartment, rung the quick, sharp bark of a revolver, and the goblet went whirling out of the Californian's hand, but the youth never even started at the shock—merely turning his head and glaring at the chief (who had fired the wonderfully-aimed shot) with eyes widely distended.

The Wolves roared in applause as they beheld the result of the shot—the practical joke of their chief—and they applauded, too, the nerve of the new-comer who had allowed the goblet to be shot out of his hand without moving a muscle.

"You are accepted!" cried the Master Wolf. "Henceforth you are one of the Wolves of Tejon! Rise, all of you, and salute a brother!"

And then the outlaws got upon their feet and howled in an extremely effective if not melodious chorus.

"And now, boys, tackle your fodder, while I have a little talk with this young man in regard to the enterprise in which he predicts that we shall all accumulate a small fortune. Follow me."

The chief descended from his throne-like seat and led the way into a small cavern situated immediately in the rear of the rocky ridge which, cropping out of the earth, served him for a seat.

The inner cave was a small, circular one, lighted by a few candles stuck upon projecting portions of the walls; some buffalo, bear and wolf skins scattered about were the only "furniture." A little Scotch terrier dog lying at the entrance to the cave kept watch and ward. The small cave was separated from the large cavern by a passage just about big enough to allow a man to pass through and that was all, and some ten feet in length.

The moment that the dog heard the sound of footsteps in the passage-way, he commenced to bark furiously, and did not cease until the voice of his master bade him be quiet.

"A vigilant sentry," observed the Californian, after they had entered the smaller cave. "It would be difficult for any of the band to surprise you unawares if any desperate man took it into his head that he would rather be captain of the Wolves than to longer serve under you."

The chief turned in considerable surprise and gazed at the youth; he was astonished, for the Californian had guessed only too well why the dog kept watch and ward at the passage-way.

"You have shrewd wits," he remarked, slowly.

"Yes, and quite shrewd enough to penetrate your disguise, Mr. Blake, so you may as well remove your mask and beard and then we can talk face to face; and allow me now to thank you most sincerely for the well-aimed shot that thrust from my lips that most disgusting draught. I am as firm-nerved as the most of mortals, but inexpressibly horrid is such a drink to me."

The chief removed his black mask, his long-haired wig and false beard, and, sure enough, Jackson Blake stood revealed.

"You stood the test well, and now you can command the power of myself and all the band to aid you in your designs."

"With your aid I shall be sure to succeed," the youth replied, confidently.

"What is the first move that you propose to make?" Blake asked.

"It will be necessary for us to get the alcalde of the Tejon Camp into our power."

"Yes, and wherefore?"

"Because the hidden treasure that I seek, the old buried riches of Michael Scott, the cattle king of Buenaventura, are concealed within that very cavern into which we were carried by the Black men of Tejon."

Blake looked amazed.

"It is the truth," the Californian continued. "In the days of old Michael Scott, the town of Tejon Camp did not exist, but the old Indian cave in the mountains was there, as it had been for years and

years before. The old man sought a secure place to hide his treasures, and there is no doubt that the peon Indian, Jose, confided to him the secret of the hidden mine of his tribe, which long ago had ceased to be worked. By one of those odd chances which often happen in this life of ours, this Alexander Black, who ever since the hiding of the treasure has been eager in the search for it, pitched his camp near the very spot where the old mine was located, and, by another odd coincidence, discovered the existence of the mine and used it for his own evil designs; never suspecting that the treasure which he had toiled so hard to gain was at his fingers' ends."

"Aha!" cried Blake, who had listened attentively to the recital, "you are quite right. The first point in the game, as matters stand now, is to lay the bold alcalde by the heels!"

CHAPTER XXII.

BACK FROM DEATH.

The alcalde sat in the saloon of the Alcalde's Ranch. The little clock, ticking on the shelf behind the bar, marked the hour of nine, and it was the morning of the day which succeeded the night which had witnessed the advent of the young Californian and the cool and off-handed sharp who bore the appellation of the Fresh of Frisco, into the town of Tejon Camp.

Alex Black, the stern and heavy-handed alcalde of the mining camp, was not a man much given to meditation, but on the present occasion he had ample reason for reflection.

He sat by the window near the bar, which looked upon the one street of the mining town. The saloon was deserted; very little business indeed the Alcalde's Ranch enjoyed during the daylight hours, for then its customers, the miners, were all busy working their respective claims along the stream or in the mountain gulches near the town. Even the bartender had deserted his post, and, fast asleep under the counter on a rude bunk, was reveling in the delights of dreamland.

As we have said, the iron-handed alcalde was deep in moody reflections; for about the first time since he had swayed the destinies of Tejon Camp, his prey had escaped him; and escaped in so mysterious a manner, too! Black was both angry and puzzled; some potent, unknown power seemed to work against him. Who was this mysterious youth who had so abruptly appeared, prepared to dispute with him for the hidden treasures of old Michael Scott, and what malicious demon had urged the keen-eyed, quick-handed, ready-witted Jack Blake through the northern passes into the Mohave valley?

One thing, though, was pretty certain now: the summary measures adopted by the Black Men of Tejon had undoubtedly rid the town of the pair.

"That infernal Indian is at the bottom of it all, I am sure," he muttered, in wrath. "The next time I get my clutches on him, though, I'll box him up so safely that he'll never get out until he walks into his grave. I failed at every point last night, and only accomplished one thing, and that I was not trying for—I drove the meddlers out of town."

And just as the alcalde finished the muttered speech, down the stairs from the upper regions of the "hotel" came the stalwart figure of Jack Blake!

The alcalde had turned his head just out of mere curiosity in order to see who it was that had slept so late, thinking that it was some customer who had drunk overmuch the night before and had lain late so as to sleep off the effects of the debauch.

Wonderful, then, was the astonishment of the alcalde when his eyes fell upon the manly form of the Fresh of Frisco.

Blake came carelessly down the stairs just as if nothing unusual had happened during the night, nodded carelessly to the alcalde, glanced at the clock, and remarked in surprise:

"Hallo! nine o'clock! why, I had no idea that it was so late. I reckoned that I had overslept myself, but I had no idea that it had got to be nine. How about breakfast? not much chance for a breakfast here, I suppose?"

"No, not now," the alcalde replied, recovering a little from his surprise. "We don't run a restaurant here; we only set out the regular meals at regular hours; but at French John's down the street you can get something to eat; he cooks to order."

"Thank you; I will patronize him; by-the-by, I believe that it's the rule here for me, as a stranger, to call upon you. You're the alcalde, ar'n't you?"

"Yes; my office is next door; office hours ten to twelve."

"All right; that will just give me time to get my breakfast; I'll see you later," and Blake passed out of the door, as easy and unconcerned as possible.

The alcalde was perplexed; he hardly knew what to make of the matter; but one thing he felt sure of: Blake did not suspect that he had aught to do with the cave proceedings. Then the idea of securing Blake upon his side came into the mind of this plotting gentleman.

"By blazes!" he muttered, "I believe that the fellow spoke the truth when he said that he knew nothing whatever about that Miguel Scott, and that he took his part merely because he thought that he was being imposed upon. I cannot see why he shouldn't be willing to serve me, provided he is well paid for it, as anybody else. I'll try him; it will do no harm."

A horseman—a stranger—riding up the street attracted the alcalde's attention, just then. He was a tall, well-built man, with a massive face and a big yellow beard. He was dressed roughly, but more like a cattle-man than a miner, and was well armed. He rode slowly up the street, evidently having just entered the town, and from the way he looked about him it was plain that he was in search of some particular spot.

Black kept his eyes fixed upon the man, for the idea had entered his head that the man was in search of him.

And it really seemed as if such was the case, for the moment his eyes fell upon the sign of the Alcalde's Ranch, his face lightened up and he directed his course straight toward the house.

"Now, who is this fellow, and what does he want?" the alcalde muttered, a frown on his face. A presentiment of danger had suddenly seized upon him—danger, and from this stranger, a man whom he had never seen before.

No child was this stern son of the old Scotch land to yield to idle fears; but by nature he was deeply superstitious; the gift of second-sight—if such a

thing could be rightfully called a gift—tended to make him so. In his vision he had been forewarned of the advent of the white-faced Fresh of Frisco, for in the person of Blake he had recognized the man whose figure had appeared to him when on the Santa Barbara, lights he had waited for the craft of Sandy McAlpine to break her bones on the sunken wreck but in the vision Blake had appeared, bearing in his arms the heiress of Buenaventura, all dripping wet, as though at the risk of his life he had plucked her from the breaking waves; but, so far, nothing had appeared to connect the careless and daring sharp in any way whatever with the girl who perished on the rock-ribbed Californian coast.

As a general thing, too, the moody alcalde's presentiments seemed to come tolerably true, and so he yielded almost implicitly to them.

Therefore, as the stranger rode up to the door dismounted and tied his horse preparatory to entering, the alcalde quickly drew his revolvers from their holsters and examined them; caps and charges all were correct and ready for use; his knife, too, was loose in its sheath and played easily up and down; he was ready to receive his visitor, whether he was friend or foe.

The man came stalking into the room, for he was a long-legged, gaunt sort of a fellow, and after he closed the door behind him, he took a good look around the room, as if to satisfy himself that he and the alcalde alone occupied the apartment; then he nodded familiarly to Blake, helped himself to a stool—chairs were few and far between in the Mohave valley—drew it up near to where the alcalde was, sat down, and gazing in an inquiring sort of way into the face of Black, said:

"You are Alex Black, the Alcalde of Tejon Camp I take it?"

"Yes, sir, that is my name," replied Black, surveying the stranger with an earnest look, and the impression gaining ground that the man was no stranger to him, although for the life of him he couldn't tell when or where he had met him.

"Well, you and I ought to be old acquaintances, although I really believe that this is the first time that we ever met face to face, though we may have done so in the old time when Michael Scott was alive."

The name of the old cattle king sent a chill through the heart of the stern, lawless alcalde. Who was this man who talked so familiarly of Michael Scott?

"Your face seems familiar to me, although I cannot place you, just at present," Black observed.

"Perhaps we have met, although I don't recall the instance just now, but I'm sure you'll know my name the moment you hear it."

"Yes, and what is your name?"

"Sandy McAlpine!"

If the man had risen and stricken the alcalde in the face he could not have astonished him more than he did by the utterance of the name.

"Sandy McAlpine!" the alcalde cried, in utter amazement. The sea had given up its dead; the Santa Maria had broken her bones on the doomed ship and her timbers had lined the beach, but the Santa Maria's master lived to tell of the danger from which he had escaped! Here he was in the flesh, literally back from the grave, a living, breathing man, worth a dozen dead fellows, all ready to make a bold fight if he had cause for quarrel!

"You seem astonished," quoth Sandy, maliciously.

"Oh, no; why should I be astonished? I know nothing of you except that I have heard your name mentioned, and so know that there is such a man in existence," replied the alcalde, with an effort recovering his composure.

"Oh, you know nothing of me of course!" cried McAlpine, in contempt. "You and Stuart McKerr did not plan my death—did not wreck my craft with the false beacon-light; but both myself and Barbara Buenaventura escaped to tell the tale."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW CLAIMANT.

AGAIN, despite the firm nerves, the alcalde could not repress a look of amazement. Barbara, the heiress, then, had escaped as well as this adventurer, but why in the name of all that was wonderful did McAlpine suspect that there was any connection between himself and Stuart McKerr?

"What are you talking about?" cried Black. It was his game always, in this life, to play a bold hand. "What have I to do with you, or with Stuart McKerr?"

"Oh, your bluff game won't work this time!" McAlpine replied, with a sneer of contempt. "I'm no fool, and I can see as far into a millstone as the man that pecked it. There was a contest between you and McKerr for the hidden treasures of the old cattle-king. He dispatched me East to secure the girl and promised me a share of the spoils, but while I was gone you and he managed to come to an understanding, and the first result of that understanding was to sacrifice my craft, myself and the girl. Oh! it was a brave trick! McKerr was so much afraid that some of your spies would discover that I had the girl on board my craft that he declared I must not land at Buenaventura but at Santa Barbara instead; and then, too, I must come in under the shadow of the night and cast anchor in the cove to the north of the town, and he, on the headland with a light, would guide me in. Eternal fool that I was! I might have suspected that if he came to any arrangement with you he would be certain to sacrifice both myself and the girl. I know an ugly secret or two about Stuart McKerr also, and that was another reason why it was to his interest that I should find a watery grave; but, some men in this world, like cats, have nine lives, and the Great Master, who rules all things, did not see fit to call me to my long reckoning just yet. You wrecked my craft, thanks to your infernal scheme, and the very moment I rode onto the old wreck on the bar, and felt her stranded bones break in the timbers of my craft, I knew exactly where I was, and realized the nature and extent of the trap into which I had fallen."

"What utter nonsense is this!" cried the alcalde, impatiently. "What on earth have I to do with you or with Stuart McKerr?"

"Oh! you were not with him, then, in Santa Barbara?"

The point was well put, and the alcalde winced for a moment, and then showed his teeth like a wolf at bay.

"Supposing I was, what of it?" he demanded. "Do you take me for a fool?" McAlpine retorted. "Thank Heaven the perils of wind and wave did not take away my senses! I knew, the moment I struck on the old ship, that I had been betrayed into a snare, and I at once set my wits to work to guess why I had been so betrayed. I struck the shore safely a mile or two north of the sand-bar, then made my way to the town, and, upon inquiring, learned that you and McKerr had taken breakfast together there that very morning and had ridden away in company. Of course then the whole matter was plain to me. I understood that you and McKerr had patched up your quarrel and resolved to work in company rather than against each other, and as the first result I had been cast overboard; but, here I am, you see—turned up again like a bad penny, and I can tell you, I am resolved to have my share of the gains of that speculation."

"I reckon that you won't get anything out of me," the alcalde exclaimed, defiantly.

"Oh, won't I?" McAlpine rejoined. "Well, that remains to be seen. I hold the heiress in my possession, and she holds the secret of the hidden treasures of old Michael Scott."

"You are playing a bluff game, Sandy McAlpine!" the alcalde cried, "but you'll find that I am as good at that as you are. The heiress is not alive; she is dead. I, myself, saw her mortal remains on the beach, whither she had been washed by the waves, and as I came up I drove away a pack of wolves who had polished the bones so neatly that not an ounce of flesh remained."

"And how did you know that it was the mortal remains of the heiress, Barbara, that you saw?" demanded McAlpine, shrewdly.

"The bones were there, and plenty of fragments of a woman's dress, and if more proof was wanted that this body was the body of Barbara, I picked up a shred of linen with her name on it," and as he completed the speech, the alcalde laid back in his chair and smiled grimly in the face of the adventurer, as much as to say, "upset this now, if you can!"

"You were deceived, my canny, alcalde!" cried McAlpine, instantly. "The wish was father to the thought. The bones you saw belonged to the sailor boy who sailed on board the Santa Maria with me, and the womanly attire that you saw on the beach was wrested by the waves from the person of the heiress—by the waves in her desperate struggle to gain the shore."

For a moment the alcalde was puzzled; was there any truth in this story? Had the heiress escaped from the cunningly-devised scheme of destruction which the banker-merchant of Buenaventura had so cleverly devised?

"Well, supposing that this is all true," Black remarked at last, "why do you come and tell it to me? If Stuart McKerr and myself are in league together, we'll be pretty apt to make it hot for you if you dare to interfere and attempt to protect the heiress from our schemes."

"That is exactly the point I am coming to," McAlpine replied. "I am quite willing to sell out my share in the matter if a fair price be given me."

"Oh, you prefer to sell rather than to fight?"

"Yes, very much prefer it."

"You're a sensible man, and you've come to the right shop to do business; but first, before we begin to talk about terms I want to be assured that your story is true."

"You want to assure yourself that the heiress is alive and that she is under my protection?"

"Yes, that's the idea, exactly."

"Oh, that is easy enough. You will have to see McKerr about the matter, I presume?"

"Undoubtedly."

"How soon can you see him?"

"Right away."

McAlpine looked astonished.

"He is in town now; come to see me especially about this business," the alcalde added.

Despite the adroit address and cool nerves of the adventurer, he could not prevent a sudden flash of anger from flushing his cheeks.

The alcalde noticed it and laughed heartily.

"Ah!" he cried, "you bear my merchant friend of Buenaventura no great amount of good will, I see."

"No, curse him!" cried McAlpine, fiercely. "I have to thank Stuart McKerr for the loss of my ship, and the Santa Maria was as good a craft as ever plowed the ocean."

"Ah, well, Stuart must make it up to you, you know."

"Yes, he or somebody else," the adventurer retorted. "Little care I where or from whom the money comes, so long as I get my hands upon it."

"If everything is as you say, if you have the girl in your hands, and are willing to betray her to us—you see I speak plainly; there is no use in beating about the bush in such matters—why you can depend upon our paying you liberally for the service. I will have to talk with McKerr about the matter, and if you will drop in here, say to-night, I've no doubt that we can come to a speedy understanding."

"All right; I'll be on hand; so long!" and with the salutation McAlpine departed. He passed through the door, untied his beast, and mounting, rode off down the street.

The alcalde was not idle while this operation was being accomplished. He struck his foot smartly upon a certain spot in the floor near his chair, evidently a concealed ring operating a bell in an adjoining apartment, for almost instantly the door at the lower end of the room opened, and a rather small, swarthy-faced fellow came hurrying into the apartment. His dress was an odd mixture of miner and herdsman. He was fully armed, and his face betrayed the rascal in every line.

"Follow yonder horseman!" the alcalde cried, pointing through the window to McAlpine, just then climbing into the saddle; keep out of his sight, but track him to his lair, no matter how far he goes; ascertain beyond the shadow of a doubt who and what he is, where he has taken up his quarters, his business in this section, and see, particularly, if he has friends or companions with him, or whether he is here alone."

"All right!" the ruffian exclaimed. "I'll track him as close as though he was a fox and I a hound hot on the scent."

"Good!" the greater the information, the better the pay."

"You don't want him settled, though?" asked the Mexican, for such he was, tapping the long knife in his girdle significantly.

"Well—no, not at present, Lope," the alcalde replied, slowly, "although I've no doubt that may come in time. I desire to see first whether he is here alone or not. He says that he has a certain companion, but I doubt it, and, in fact, as I think the matter over, I am not sure that he said she was here—this companion is a woman."

"Suppose he should discover that I was playing the spy upon him, and attempt to be ugly about the matter?" the ruffian asked, with a sinister grin upon his ugly yellow face.

"Oh, well, in such a case I suppose you would have to protect yourself," the alcalde replied, reflectively. "We've got about all the men in town now who can make a living here, and if any accident should happen to this stranger, why, I reckon the Camp would be able to get along without him."

"You wouldn't blame me, then?"

"Oh, no; but I would rather that you should find out all about him first, if you can."

"I'll attend to it," and the Mexican hurried back through the saloon to the back door, so as to gain the street without being observed by the man he was about to track.

A sly, wily dog was this same Lope Domas—Lope, the Mexican, as he was generally called, and as big a cutthroat as ever put a knife into a fellow-being. It was currently reported and commonly believed that the Mexican had scored a life for every finger and toe he possessed, and few men were there in Tejon Camp bold enough to cross this little, wily, yellow devil when his blood was up and he was on the war-path; no better tool than he could the alcalde boast in all the Mohave valley.

"He'll give a good account of my bold Sandy," the alcalde muttered, rising and stretching his gaunt limbs lazily; "and now for this bold-spoken sport—this Jackson Blake; he must yield to my will, or else I'll set Lope after him, too."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A "FRESH" PROPOSITION.

BLACK sauntered out of the saloon and proceeded to the door of the little shanty which adjoined the Alcalde's Ranch, and over the door of which an extremely modest sign bore the words:

ALCALDE'S OFFICE.

Unlocking the door, the ruler of Tejon Camp entered the single apartment contained within the shanty. It was scantily furnished; in fact, furniture was pretty expensive in the Mohave valley, as it had to be all transported on mule-back over the mountains, and the very plainest article almost cost its weight in gold for freight, to say nothing of the original cost, before it could be set down in the mining town. The "office" held a rude, home-made desk, three stools, two large dry-goods boxes, with the top and one side knocked out, so as to serve for prisoner and witness boxes, and that was all.

The desk was quite peculiar in one respect; it had the usual slanting top, and a place for a drawer, but no drawer was there, nor had there ever been one, but in its place was a shelf where the alcalde, when holding trials, always placed a brace of ready-cocked revolvers and a long, keen-edged hunting-knife, stout and true enough in its blade, when wielded by a vigorous hand, to split an inch board in twain.

In this way the dispenser of justice for Tejon Camp always had his weapons handy to his grasp, prepared for any emergencies, and on more than one occasion the articles had been of great service, for, as Cardinal Richelieu once wisely said: "Despair sometimes turns captives into conquerors," and more than one bold soul when rudely forced to the bar of justice and asked why he had dared to disturb the peace of the mining town by wild and unseemly acts, had attempted to answer the accusation by slaying the alcalde in cold blood; but the cocked revolver, backed by the iron face of Black, had awed the culprit to abject submission, although twice the alcalde had been obliged to shoot the man down in cold blood, and thus speedily end the trial.

Black seated himself at the table and then deposited his weapons in their usual places—not that he feared trouble with Blake, for he intended to talk sweetly and mildly to him, understanding that in this case he had a party to deal with upon whom bent brows and loud words would have little effect.

The alcalde had made up his mind to attach Blake to his side if such a thing was possible, and he had very little doubt that he would succeed in the attempt, for he reasoned that Blake was too sharp a fellow not to know upon what side his bread was buttered.

"Well, one thing is certain in my mind," the alcalde muttered; "he either joins my forces or else I'll make this town so hot for him that he'll find it mighty uncomfortable to stay here."

And, just as Black gave utterance to this resolution, the door opened, and the bold face and manly figure of the Fresh of Frisco appeared.

"How are ye?" he said, with a familiar nod, closing the door behind him, and taking a quiet survey of the apartment. "Ready for business, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir; sit down and make yourself comfortable."

Blake helped himself to the stool, and drawing it up to the desk sat down upon it, then rested his elbow upon the judicial piece of furniture in an extremely comfortable, but decidedly free and easy manner.

The alcalde didn't relish this sort of thing at all; it was his habit to awe people and keep them at a distance, but this cool and easy son of fortune evidently wasn't that kind of chap at all. To use the common Westernism, he didn't "awe" worth a cent.

Black made a grimace and showed his teeth, as was usual with him when annoyed, but with a great effort he repressed his temper and endeavored to appear agreeable.

"Well, here I am, on hand," Blake remarked, breaking the silence, "although I don't exactly understand the little game. I have been accustomed to have formal meetings with mayors, alcaldes, Judge Lynchs and other distinguished officers of the various towns that I have visited, but these interviews to which I refer were always held just before I left, not immediately upon my arrival."

"Well, we are a sort of a peculiar community here, Mr. Blake," the alcalde suggested.

"Yes, so I have heard, and I may add, so I have seen, during my brief sojourn in your town; but towns and camps are about all alike to me," he added. "It don't make much difference as long as the general business is good and the dust is panning out well; if there's any money in circulation I reckon I stand a chance to get my share of it as well as the next man."

"How do you propose to acquire that dust?" asked the alcalde, in an extremely bland way.

"Play poker with the men who have got it," replied Blake, in the most matter-of-fact way.

"Oh, you don't intend then to open a store here or to invest in any mining speculation?"

"No, sir; store-keeping is too confining; it wouldn't suit me at all; and then there isn't the least bit of excitement about it; and, as for mining, why that's all a lottery. When I do business I want a sure thing, like poker, for instance; put me at a poker table with the chips going up lively, and I know exactly where I am."

"Well, it seems to me, Mr. Blake, that you ain't a-going to be much benefit to this hyer Camp," the alcalde observed.

"Oh, yes, I'll be a heap! I'll just help to circulate the money more than any other man you've got in the burg!"

"No, sir!" Black cried, decidedly, "we ain't got a bit of use for card-sharps of your caliber, in this hyer town at all."

"Ain't you a little hasty in your decision?"

"No, sir; we've got fellows enough of your style in camp already."

"Ah, but you don't know what my style is, yet," Blake responded, sweetly and smilingly. "Just give me a chance, you know. I'll break three or four of your first-class card-sharps before I've been in town a week; then they'll have to clear out and go some where else, and that will leave plenty of room for me, do you see?"

"No, sir, I do not," replied the alcalde, sharply. "There's only one chance that I can see for a man like yourself to remain in town and make a good thing of it, but perhaps you wouldn't like to accept it," and Black shot a quick glance from under his heavy brows at the placid face of the other.

"Well, I don't know," Blake remarked, with a sort of a drawl. "It depends a good deal, I suppose, upon what it is. I'm deuced hard up, just now, and beggars mustn't be choosers, you know."

"You understand that I rule this town just about as I like."

"Yes, I've heard so," and there was a fearless expression about the mouth of Blake which did not please the alcalde at all, and yet, it was nothing at which he could take offense.

"The Camp is growing larger and larger all the time, and I have trouble sometimes with men who come in and fancy they can run the town as well as I do."

"Yes, I see."

"Well, now, it is necessary for me to have good men at my back in the time of trouble, and from what I have seen of you I fancy that you would fill the bill exactly. I don't mean, you know, to put you in the ranks, but give you a command—make you a sort of chief of police—in fact, the second man in the town after myself."

"Exactly."

"You get my idea?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, what do you say?" asked Black, just a little anxiously.

"Oh, I ain't the man at all!"

The alcalde looked disgusted.

"I never could fight anybody's battles except my own, and the free fights into which any stranger is welcome. If you were to put a collar on me and make me anybody's dog, I'd be no good."

"I'm sorry to hear it!" Black exclaimed, "but, hadn't you better take time to think the matter over?"

"Oh, I shouldn't change a bit if I was to think the matter over for a month!"

"Well, I suppose you understand how we run things up in this region," and the alcalde began to show his teeth a little; "any one that is not for me is ag'in' me, and I'm a right-up-and-down man. I help my friends and strike my foes."

"That's natural, and as for me, I play a lone hand, alcalde, but every time I back it with my life!" Blake rose slowly to his feet as he spoke and there was a light in his clear blue eyes which made the alcalde quail, master though he was of Tejon Camp.

At this point the door of the shanty was thrown violently open and an excited man rushed in.

"Whar are ye, Black?" he cried. "There's a woman arrived—a regular critter, and she's a play-actress too, and is gwine to gi'n us a show!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STRANGE WOMAN.

BLAKE took advantage of the interruption to escape further conversation with the alcalde.

"Well, so-long, alcalde! See you again before I leave town," and then he sauntered out through the open door into the street. Black glared after him with an angry face; he realized that he had utterly failed; he could not use the Fresh of Frisco as a tool.

"Well, well," he muttered, between his firm-set teeth, "since you want war you shall have it, and I will take care to make it red-hot, too. Before you are many days older you will find that it was rather a foolish act to come right into Tejon Camp and attempt to brave Alex Black!"

"Say, alcalde!" cried the impatient messenger, astonished that his communication had not excited more attention, for women were few and far between in the Mohave valley, "how about the she-critter, eh?"

"What did you say—a woman?"

"Yes, sir-ee, boss-fly! and, oh! ain't she a ripper!"

"What does she want here?" cried the alcalde.

"Women are no benefit to the Camp; the men always get to fighting about them; the last two petitions that were here cost a dozen good men their lives afore I ran them out of town."

"Oh, this daisy ain't no common she! You can bet your boots on it, and no mistake!"

The alcalde contracted his lips impatiently at the

assertion. He was pretty well aware of the kind of women that the miners in the mountains looked upon as angels. This new-comer was probably a little better-looking—a little better dressed than the rest of the wandering sisterhood of vultures, who, for the sake of the golden dust that the patient miners wrested from the bosom of old mother nature, dared the perils of the mountain region and the wild life of the frontier.

"The better-looking she is, and the smarter, the more dangerous," Black observed, sourly. It was no easy matter, as it was, to keep the turbulent spirits who dwelt in the valley under control, and these fair frail ones brought disorder in their train.

"Oh, alcalde, this one is a cut above the common run of 'em, I tell ye!" the miner declared with fluent force. "Oh, she's a hull team with a big dog under the wagon! I met her as she rode into the Camp, and she smiled at me as pert and as chippy as a hull row of squirrels. 'This is Tejon Camp?' she said. 'Yes, marm, it are,' I 'lowed. 'What is the best hotel in the Camp?' 'The Alcalde's Ranch, right down the street, thar,' and I pointed out your shanty to her. And then she said, 'Won't you have the kindness to show me thar?' Wal, I 'lowed I could; and so we come up the street together, and on the way she axed me if thar had ever been a theater show in the town, and I told her that thar never had, nor any theater-actors either, although I had seen some once at Los Angeles when I were over thar. And then she up and told me as how she was a theater-actress and she had been advised by her friends to come over the mountains and give the boys a few shows in the mining-camps. Wal—I told her how in my opinion, this hyer Camp war jest ripe for sich a thing and that she could make big money if she got the thing started right."

"She's in the hotel, now?" Black asked, his curiosity rather excited by the recital.

"Oh, yes; your tumbler-juggler laid himself out to do the handsome thing by her, and I reckon that he's stowed her away in the best room that you've got in the shanty."

"I suppose that I had better go and see the woman—"

"Oh, she ain't no common woman—she's a lady, she is, every inch of her!" the miner declared.

Black looked a little incredulous, but he contented himself with simply nodding; then he locked up the office and proceeded at once to the hotel.

The bar-keeper—the tumbler-juggler, as the miner had termed him, Black found to be equally impressed with the new-comer, and he described her charms in glowing terms; and the alcalde really began to be anxious. If she was going to play the mischief with the men in this way, and had a mind to be troublesome, there was no telling into what an uproar she might set the Camp.

Black thought that he had better see her at once and satisfy himself in regard to the danger to be anticipated. So he made his way to her room and knocked at the door.

A clear, full, womanly voice, rich in music, bade him enter, and at once he obeyed the command, to find himself in the presence of a tall, finely-formed girl, with a wonderfully beautiful, olive-hued face. She was dressed very plainly in a traveling costume which showed evident traces of the long and fatiguing journey over the mountains.

The girl had risen to receive her visitor, and Black, for once in his life, taken completely by surprise, felt a little ill at ease in the presence of this charming creature.

He had not expected to behold anything of this kind at all. He had looked to see a middle-aged woman, somewhat the worse for wear, and had not calculated upon being received by a young and beautiful girl, hardly out of her teens, and as fresh in her fair young beauty as a newly-plucked moss-rose.

No wonder that the miner was astonished—no wonder that the level-headed bar-keeper, whom long experience in dealing with all sorts of men, on bibulous refreshment intent, both with money and without, had rendered unnaturally shrewd and suspicious, was at once "taken into camp" by the charms of this strange woman.

The girl fixed inquiring eyes upon the alcalde, and he, in a measure recovering from his surprise, saw that he was called upon to explain the reason of his visit.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said, "but learning of your arrival here I felt that it was my duty to call upon you, seeing that you are a stranger to our town. My name is Black—Alexander Black—and I am the alcalde of this town."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Black," she responded, and in a most charming manner she brought a chair to him; "please be seated."

"Thank you, miss," he said, accepting the chair, seating himself, and all the while feasting his eyes on the fresh young beauty of her almost matchless face.

"As the alcalde of the town," he continued, "I came to bid you welcome to our Camp, and to see if there was anything that I could do to make your stay pleasant while you remained with us."

"I am very much obliged, indeed, and feel really grateful for this kind interest in a stranger."

"Oh, don't mention it, miss!" the alcalde hastened to reply. "A stranger and a lady are two strong claims upon my attention."

"I have come to your town partly on a professional tour and partly on private business. I am an actor."

"So I have been informed."

"I was obliged to cross the mountains on private business, and some of my friends suggested that I might as well make my trip a profitable one by giving a series of entertainments at the principal mining camps."

"A very excellent idea, and I've no doubt that you will find it a very profitable one; at least I feel sure that I can answer for this town. I've no doubt that you can pack the largest room that we have in the Camp at a dollar a head."

"If it would not be asking too much for you to suggest some gentleman whom I could rely upon to make the necessary arrangements; of course I should be willing to allow him a liberal salary," she said, with an earnest look in her beautiful eyes.

"Oh, I will attend to it myself, miss; I should be only too happy to attend to it for you."

"But I couldn't think of troubling you!" she protested.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all."

"I'm sure I shall never be able to repay you, nor to forget your kindness."

"Don't mention it, I beg."

The alcalde was wonderfully gallant for a man of his stern and iron-like nature, but, to relate the exact truth, the alcalde had become infatuated at the first glance with this lovely creature; his was not a nature to yield idly to sudden passion, but when such a man does allow the wild impulses of his heart to have full sway, then, as a general rule, he yields to absolute mastership.

"And you have private business in this region, you say, miss?" the alcalde queried.

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps I can be of service to you there, also?"

"Oh, I don't doubt that you can, sir, if you would care to take the trouble."

"No trouble at all!"

"It is connected with mining matters; if you are an old resident of this region perhaps you will know something about it. I suppose of course that you have heard of the old cattle king, Michael Scott?"

For a moment the alcalde stared in utter amazement; strange how for the past few years the memory of his old master was brought back to him.

"Oh, yes," he said, after quite a pause, "I knew old Michael Scott very well indeed. I was in his employ once."

"Well, I ought to be acquainted with him, too, although I never saw him," she remarked. "He was a sort of relative of mine."

"Indeed!" and Black fully looked the astonishment he felt.

"Oh, yes, I married his son."

"What?" cried the alcalde, in utter amazement, "you married his son?"

"Yes," and the girl looked surprised that the apparently innocent remark should have such an effect upon her visitor.

"His son!" the alcalde repeated.

"Yes, his son—Miguel Scott."

"Miguel Scott! oh yes; I've heard of him," and the alcalde, although in a fever of impatience, strove to appear calm. "And where is your husband now?"

"Oh, he's dead, sir."

"Dead?" Here was another surprise.

"Yes; he died in San Francisco about a year ago, and as he left me totally unprovided for I was obliged to go on the stage in order to support myself; but my husband, just before his death, told me that there was a large amount of money in this region belonging to him, coming from his father the old cattle king, and that if anything happened to him I must come in search of it."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ADVENTURER'S PLAN.

The alcalde was decidedly perplexed; this disclosure was entirely unexpected. He had felt convinced that the young Californian was Miguel Scott in disguise, and now, lo, and behold! up starts this strange girl who declares that she was the wife of Miguel Scott and that Miguel Scott is dead.

Rapidly Black reflected upon the situation; was this new event in his favor or otherwise? Most certainly it would be more apt to advance his chance of securing the buried treasures than retard it; but, was the girl well informed of all the circumstances? A series of skillfully-put questions no doubt would put him in possession of all the facts in the case.

"No doubt you have noticed that I seemed surprised when I learned your name," Black observed.

"Yes, sir; I noticed the fact."

"I was your grandfather's right-hand man, in the old time, and pretty well informed in regard to all his affairs; your husband, his son, I never saw; but a youth, a Californian, appeared in the Camp yesterday; he took pains to conceal his name, and from the mysterious way in which he acted it was generally believed that it was young Miguel Scott."

"Oh no, sir," the girl declared, positively; "Miguel Scott is dead; there is not the least doubt in the world in regard to it, and when my trunk comes—it is on its way, by express—I will show you a scrap cut from one of the San Francisco newspapers with the date of his death and the notice of the funeral."

The tone of the speaker carried conviction with it; but, if the young Californian was not Miguel Scott, and he strongly declared that he was not, who then, in the name of wonder, was he? and what was he doing in Tejon Camp? So reflected the alcalde, and the more he thought about the matter the greater he was puzzled. But, one thing was certain, though—affairs now looked much better for him than they had.

This girl was the undoubted heir to old Scott's hidden treasure; true, the other girl, Barbara, was in the land of the living—that is, if any reliance could be placed upon Sandy McAlpine's statement, but what of that? the adventurer and his protegee could be easily removed from the path; the road to fortune was open. Why should he not tread it in company with this beautiful girl who had so suddenly and unexpectedly appeared upon the scene? The scheme was worth the trial and the dark and plotting alcalde determined to win the girl if he could and the hidden treasures along with her.

"I think I know something about the matter to which your husband referred," he said. "It was commonly reported, and readily believed, that old Michael Scott, just before his death, hid away in some secure nook in the mountains quite a large sum in gold and precious stones."

"Yes, a secret cache."

"Many have searched for it and without avail."

"Ah, that was because they did not possess the clew to the hiding-place of the treasure."

"And you have a clew?" exclaimed the alcalde, eagerly.

"I think that I have, but I am not quite sure."

"You can easily ascertain, though?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, you shall have all the aid that I can give you, and, although I say it, who, perhaps, should not, yet there's not a man in this valley can aid you as well as I."

"I can readily believe that, sir."

For a half an hour longer, the interview continued; the rest of the conversation was of little importance, though, and not worth detailing; and the alcalde

withdrew, feeling sure that at last he was on the right road to prosperity.

And now, for a while, we will leave the alcalde and his plans, and follow the progress of the adventurer, Sandy McAlpine.

After the interview with Black, Sandy mounted his beast and rode away, his heart filled with bitter rage.

McAlpine had played a bold game and so far he had been successful. He had deceived Black when he had declared the girl, Barbara, had escaped from the wreck. In reality he did not know of his own knowledge whether she had escaped or not.

On the night of the wreck the moment the Santa Maria impaled herself on the sharp bones of the stranded ship, McAlpine, at the helm, was thrown violently forward by the shock and a huge wave, sweeping over the vessel at that moment, swept him away like an idle straw on its crest; but the Scotch adventurer was an excellent swimmer, and being well acquainted with the set of the currents on that coast, allowed the tide to bear him onward at its own sweet will, merely using his hands and feet sufficiently to keep his head above water; and, so, in time the waves landed him on the shore, some two miles north of where the ship had struck.

McAlpine's story of the escape of the girl was merely a bold and clever device to learn why he had been decoyed into the very jaws of death by the destruction of the Santa Maria, lured on by the false beacon light.

In Santa Barbara, the day after the wreck, he had learned that Stuart McKerr had been seen in the town, in company with a tall, raw-boned, red-bearded man; this answered the description of Alex Black, the alcalde of Tejon Camp, exactly, and McAlpine suspected at once that in some mysterious way the two men had come together, and that he had been sacrificed to seal the bond of union between them. Hence his visit to Tejon Camp and the cunning device by means of which he learned the truth. He had sought the merchant, McKerr, at his place of business in Buenaventura, determined to force him to a reckoning; and there had learned that McKerr had gone to the mountain mines on business. The adventurer suspected instantly that he had gone to Tejon Camp, to see Black, and had followed in pursuit.

"It is as I thought," he muttered, as he rode down the street; "that infernal scoundrel, McKerr, having come to an understanding with Black, coolly planned the death of both myself and the girl. Poor child! her forebodings were correct enough; she said that, instead of a welcome, she expected to find a grave in this strange land, and so it proved; but I escaped, and now, if I don't make McKerr pay well for his treachery, then my name is not Sandy McAlpine."

The Scotchman had laid his plans well. McKerr had departed that morning to visit a new discovery in one of the mountain gulches just above the town, where the nature of the ore rendered machinery necessary, and the owners of the claim were anxious to get the merchant to take an interest in the "strike," and advance the necessary funds to put up the "stamps" to work the ore. As the mine was only a little way from the town the merchant had mounted his horse and rode off unattended. McAlpine knew that he would probably return to the town about noon, and so, after satisfying himself that his surmise in regard to the merchant's treachery was correct, he resolved to waylay McKerr as he returned.

McAlpine was one of those many-sided men who are fully at home almost everywhere, and he was equally as good a mountaineer as he was a sailor; so he selected an ambush with the eye of a brigand.

He concealed his horse in the neighboring thicket and then he crouched down behind a pine tree, revolver in hand.

And so it happened that when Stuart McKerr came riding along, the reins loose upon the horn of his saddle, his note-book and pencil in hand, and he busy in figuring up the prospective profits of the mill which he thought of putting up in the mountain gulch, he was most wonderfully and woefully astonished by McAlpine, darting out upon him from behind the pine tree, like a hawk pouncing upon a helpless chicken.

Revolver in hand, the weapon cocked and leveled, McAlpine appeared before the amazed and discomfited banker like an unquiet spirit from the silent tomb.

In this case Davy Jones's locker had not held its victim.

The very last man in all this world that Stuart McKerr expected to see was Sandy McAlpine.

"Come, dismount, partner; we've a little business to talk over, and we couldn't have a better opportunity!" the assailant cried.

"Sandy McAlpine!" McKerr exclaimed.

"Yes, or else his ghost from the bosom of the Pacific," the other responded; "but, whether I am ghost or human, it matters not; you'll find me a pretty hard customer to deal with."

"What do you want with me?"

"Light down and then you'll learn. Come, hurry up! for I'm in no mood for loitering. I give you fair warning that I am in dead earnest, and if you attempt to trifle with me in any way, I'll put a bullet through you with as little ceremony as though you were a prairie wolf."

McAlpine meant it, and the merchant understood from the determined look in the eyes of his assailant that, if he provoked him, he would be as good as his word; so, slowly and reluctantly McKerr dismounted.

"Tie your horse!" McAlpine commanded.

The merchant obeyed.

"Now, then, here's a draft for five thousand dollars: payable at your banking-house to my order," and McAlpine tossed the draft down at McKerr's feet. "Have the kindness to write your name at the bottom of it!" And from one of his pockets the adventurer took a pen and a little bottle of ink. He was amply prepared for every emergency.

"Five thousand dollars!" cried McKerr, aghast at the sum.

"Yes, five thousand!"

"But to give you such a sum as that!—for this draft with my name at the bottom of it will be cashed immediately if you present it at my store in Buenaventura."

"That is exactly what I expect," McAlpine replied, coolly.

"But this is sheer robbery; it is an outrage!" McKerr exclaimed, trembling with excitement and rage.

"Oh, and when you lured me to death and wrecked my little craft, about all that I had in the world, that was not an outrage, eh?"

"I am in your power now, but some day my turn will come!" the merchant declared, purple with rage.

"I am quite willing to let the future take care of itself so long as the present works well for me. Come, sign!"

And then came a sudden change in the scene; a dark form bounded from the underbrush and flung itself upon McAlpine.

CHAPTER XXVII. TURNING THE TABLES.

With the spring of a tiger the unknown assailant had leaped upon the adventurer, and stout Sandy McAlpine, despite his great strength, was taken at a fearful disadvantage.

The merchant of Buenaventura, too, was also prompt to act, and being a man of large and muscular frame, almost a match for McAlpine at any time, he proved to be of no mean assistance to the other.

In a second after the new-comer attacked the adventurer in the rear, McKerr grappled with him in front, and between the efforts of the two, despite Sandy's desperate struggles, he was quickly brought to the ground, and then, when this feat was accomplished, with a dexterity due to long and constant practice, the new-comer whipped out a lariat and skillfully trussed McAlpine hand and foot, and so tightly and artistically was this job performed, that, when it was concluded, the adventurer was practically as helpless as a child in the hands of his foes, exposed to a terrible fate indeed if they chose to push their advantage.

McAlpine conquered, the two victors stood upright, drew a long breath and looked down in triumph upon their prey.

The merchant had at once recognized the Mexican, for it was the cutthroat bully of Tejon Camp who had come so opportunely to his assistance. The alcalde had not neglected to introduce his best bravo to the merchant.

"Now then, Sandy McAlpine, I fancy that the situation is somewhat changed!" McKerr exclaimed, in triumph.

"I was foolish to have given you a single chance for your life!" the adventurer retorted, bitterly. "I ought to have settled my account with you with a well-aimed bullet the moment I saw you."

"Oh!" McKerr cried, "is that what you think? By the faith that is in me, Sandy McAlpine, I think that with your own lips, you have sealed your doom!" And then he turned to the Mexican. "How did it happen that you came as you did? Was it accident or design? By all that is lucky but you came at the right moment, for the fellow had me foul!"

"Orders," replied the cutthroat, laconically.

"Oh, yes, orders!" cried the adventurer, in anger. "orders from your ally, the black-hearted alcalde of Tejon Camp, and, like a fool, I never suspected that he would put a watch upon me, although I might have known that he would."

"You are not a wise man to walk into the lion's den, take him by the beard and then think no evil consequences would follow the rash act," the merchant remarked. "What were the orders regarding this fellow?" he asked, again addressing the Mexican.

"To follow him—find out where he went and who he had with him, for he said that a woman accompanied him."

"Aha!" cried McKerr, abruptly, "that was your game, eh?" The merchant, a shrewd and crafty plotter himself, at once jumped to the other's plan. "You pretended that Barbara Scott had escaped from the wreck, and you came here to see how much money you could extort out of us. Oh, it was a bold game; but it has failed, and now I am master of your fate. Come, what have you to say for yourself?"

The adventurer scowled, but would not gratify his enemy with a reply.

"But you have failed at every point, and now your life is at my mercy!" the merchant continued, in triumph. "Sandy McAlpine, is there any reason in the world why I should spare you, now that I hold you helpless in my power?"

"Oh, go on with your work, and don't waste your breath," McAlpine retorted, impatiently; "you may need it some day to cool your porridge!"

"What were the orders, in regard to this man's life?" the merchant asked of the Mexican.

"To kill him if he was ugly," the cutthroat answered, speaking as carelessly as though he referred to a rabbit rather than to a human being.

"Well, then you might as well settle him at once and so save all further trouble," McKerr remarked, after reflecting for a moment in regard to the matter.

The Mexican took his revolver from his pocket where it hung suspended at his side and cocking the weapon coolly approached the helpless man in order to make his aim certain.

Despite his lion will and his cool nerves the sweat-drops began to ooze out on the forehead of the adventurer. Sandy McAlpine had seen the dark angel of death pretty close to him quite a number of times during his life of adventure, but never nearer than now.

"All ready," said the bravo, taking deliberate aim at the head of the prostrate man, the muzzle not a yard from him.

"Pull, then, and good-by, Sandy McAlpine!" cried the merchant.

The Mexican obeyed on the word, but there were two reports instead of one, the first a moment quicker than the second.

Wonderful was the result.

A new-comer had turned the bend in the trail, a hundred feet off, just at the moment when the merchant had given the command to fire, and, unobserved by all the actors in the tragic scene, had immediately taken a hand in the affair.

He perceived that murder was in the air and at once took action. He was resolved at all hazards and at all risks, if he could, to prevent the perpetration of the bloody deed.

His the first shot; the Mexican's the second.

Lope had aimed, with bloody design, to take the life of the adventurer, and the new-comer, with a

quick, snap shot, fired apparently without the formality of aim being taken at all, had struck the revolver from the hand of the cutthroat, the shock acting upon the Mexican like a shock from a galvanic battery, almost rendering helpless his strong, cunning right arm.

The timely bullet saved the life of the bound and helpless man, for the bullet of the bravo, diverted from its course by the wonderful shot, sped away harmless through the air.

"Hallo! what are you about?" the new-comer cried, the moment he fired, advancing rapidly with outstretched weapon, fully master of the situation.

"Help! help!" exclaimed McAlpine; "these men intend to murder me in cold blood."

By this time the Mexican had recovered from the effects of the sudden shock which the stranger had so unceremoniously bestowed upon him, and, with a muttered curse, he sprung toward his revolver, but the stranger was on the alert and with a warning word he halted the cutthroat.

"Hold on!" he cried, imperiously, "don't touch that weapon or I shall be compelled to bore you!"

The tone of the stranger's voice perfectly satisfied the Mexican that the speaker would be as good as his word; and then, too, the new-comer was no stranger to him, although he was to the merchant who had never had the pleasure of making his acquaintance.

The new-comer was Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco.

With that remarkable spirit of interference which was so strong in his nature, Blake no sooner looked upon the scene than he was impelled to come to the rescue of the man, who, bound and helpless upon the ground, was at the mercy of the others.

The merchant glared in anger when he saw the Mexican halt so promptly at the call of the new-comer. He knew nothing of Blake—nothing whatever of the Fresh of Frisco's wonderful skill with all sorts of weapons; he had no idea that it was the stranger's skillfully-aimed ball which had stricken the revolver from the hand of the Mexican; on the contrary, he had fancied that Lope had carelessly missed the almost certain shot and had dropped his weapon in disgust, and so the wily McKerr, loth to give up his prey, now so secure in his power, showed a brave front to the stranger.

His revolver was out and so he instantly "covered" the bold intruder with it, an operation which did not seem to trouble Blake in the least, for he held his weapon at the level of his waist and made no attempt to repeat the other's threatening gesture.

"Be off with you and mind your own business!" the merchant cried, loudly. "Why do you thrust yourself into a quarrel which can have no possible interest to you?"

"Oh, it's a way I have," Blake replied, in his easy, careless manner, which was so deceptive, and which so generally led strangers into a wrong impression.

"Well, it's a way that you had better get out of!" cried McKerr, arrogantly. He fancied that he had measured his man, and that, awed by his bold front, the stranger was, to use the mountain phrase, beginning to "take water."

"Oh, but I ain't, you know," Blake retorted, rather enjoying the joke.

"You had better; you may interfere in a quarrel that will cost you dear!"

"This one, perhaps, eh?" asked Blake, in a bantering tone.

"Yes, this one, and if you'll take my advice you'll travel out of this about as fast as your legs can carry you."

"And supposing I don't choose to travel, what then?"

"What then?" cried McKerr, angrily; "why then I'll give your friends, if you have any, a first-class chance to provide a tip-top funeral for you."

"Ha! ha!" Blake laughed, merrily, for the idea struck him as being a comical one, "you'll provide a funeral for me, eh? I hope that you'll give me time to get ready."

"Come, be off with you; I am tired of talking!" McKerr commanded.

"Well, stop talking then and act a little."

"You fool! do you want me to murder you in cold blood?"

"You murder me? Oh, nonsense!" was Blake's cool rejoinder.

CHAPTER XXVIII. A FAIR PROPOSAL.

For a moment McKerr stared in amazement; to be thus defied by a man completely in his power and at his mercy was really wonderful.

"Why, you impudent scoundrel!" he cried, in a rage, "haven't you got eyes? Can't you see at a glance that I hold your life in the very hollow of my hand?"

"No, I can't see it, and I very much doubt that such is the case."

"Why I have you now 'covered' by my weapon—"

"And the hammer down," Blake interrupted, quickly, "while my revolvers are self-cockers and they only require a single pull to both raise the hammer and let loose the charge. Now calculate how many shots I can fire while you are cocking your pistol and see how much chance you have. Why, you big idiot! I could put three balls at least into you before you could cock your pistol!"

For the first time the merchant comprehended that he had mistaken the man, and that the stranger really held him at a terrible disadvantage.

"Now, then," Blake continued, "I propose to sit in judgment in this case. I don't know anything about the merits of this quarrel at all, and so I am well qualified to give a most impartial opinion. At present you've got this man foul, and, if I'm any judge of signs, you were going to send him either to heaven or to the other place, with a mighty short shrift, when I appeared upon the scene."

"He attempted my life!" cried McKerr, hastily, "and swore that he would kill me if I didn't sign a check for five thousand dollars!"

"Stranger, I call upon you to give me a fair show for my life!" McAlpine exclaimed, eager, like a drowning man, to clutch at any straw that promised hope.

"You shall have it, sir," Blake replied, with a courteous bow, "I give you my word for that. You shall find, all of you, that I'll make the most im-

partial and upright judge that ever heard a case in this hyer golden land."

"I am satisfied to abide by your decision!" the adventurer cried, quickly. "If after hearing the case you decide that I ought to meet death at the hands of this man, I will surrender my life, without a single appeal for mercy!"

"He talks fair enough!" declared Blake, addressing the merchant; "what have you to say in regard to the matter?"

"Why should I submit my quarrels to your judgment?" McKerr demanded, angrily. "This man and myself are bitter enemies; the fortune of war has given him into my hands; I have overpowered and bound him—his life is mine; why then should I give him another chance simply at your bidding?"

"Because you are two to one and that ain't fair play!" Blake responded. "If you were man to man, and you had overcome him in a fair fight, why then it would be a different matter; to slay a man in the heat of passion, with the red riot of rage hot in your brain, is one thing; but to kill a foe in cold blood and he disarmed, bound and helpless at your feet, is quite another. A brave man will kill his enemy in a fair and open fight, but none but a cowardly cur will murder a man with cool deliberation, as you two were about to do when chance brought me upon the scene; but, we're going to have a fair trial now. Untie that man!" The command was addressed to the Mexican, and was enforced by an extremely significant motion with the revolver.

The cutthroat glanced at the speaker for a moment, his countenance dark with rage; then he looked at the merchant as if to ask his advice, but McKerr, astounded at the cool bravado of Blake, was unwilling to bring on a conflict with him.

"Come, come, hurry up; I'm not a particularly patient man, and it worries me to be kept waiting!" Blake commanded. "Release that man at once, or I'll be obliged to let daylight right through you!"

"But I protest against this interference!" the merchant cried.

"Protest all you like, if it will ease your mind any," Blake retorted. "I'll give you about one minute—just about the time it takes me to count ten to release that man, and if he is not free at the end of that time I shall consider that the war has begun and I shall go in to 'salivate' both of you to the best of my ability."

The merchant and the Mexican exchanged glances—glances full of baffled hate and impotent rage.

"Now—fair warning—one—two—three—four—five—"

Unconsciously the voice of the speaker began to deepen and the peculiar glitter, so ominous of danger, to appear in his eyes.

The cutthroat hesitated no longer; he knelt by the side of the prostrate man and with his long, glittering knife cut the strong lariat that so securely fettered his limbs.

"Ten!"

Clear and distinct came the word from Blake's lips, but with the utterance, up to his feet rose Sandy McAlpine, a free man once again.

"Pick up your weapon, stranger," Blake ordered; "there's no telling but what it may come handy afore you get through with this hyer matter."

The revolver had been forced from McAlpine's grasp during his desperate struggle with his assailants, but he was quick to obey the command.

"And now, gentlemen, since we are going to have a trial instead of a fight—although the fight may come afterward—I suggest that we all put up our weapons, and then no one of us will have an advantage over the other," Blake remarked.

Slowly and sullenly McKerr thrust his pistol back into its pocket, then Blake replaced his revolver in his belt, as he announced:

"The court is open, and the judge is ready to do his duty without fear or favor, so spit out your stories. First and foremost, I want all to understand that I'm going to be just as impartial a man in this hyer case as you could scare up clean from the Mexican line to the Golden Gate. I don't know any thing about any of you—never set eyes on you two principal parties, although I have had the pleasure of seeing this gentleman before," and he bowed to the Mexican with as much ceremony as though he had been the greatest man in the land. "I'll give you a good, square judgment, for of course I've not the slightest possible interest in your quarrel."

"This man attempted my life!" McKerr cried, angrily. "He hid himself behind a tree and then jumped out into the trail with drawn revolver and took me at a disadvantage. He swore that he'd take my life unless I signed a check in his favor for five thousand dollars."

"Well, he did strike you pretty heavy," Blake commented.

"He had me in his power, and it was either my money or my life when my friend yonder happened to arrive, and he at once came to my assistance, and between us we overpowered this scoundrel and, but for your interference, his soul would be roasting in the flames below, by this time."

"The old gentleman down-stairs will hold a spite against me, then, I presume, for interfering," Blake observed, jocosely.

"Now hear my side of the story!" McAlpine interposed. "I did waylay and assault this man, exactly as he has stated; to explain the reason it will be necessary for me to relate quite a story."

"Go ahead, sir," Blake said, with a polite bow; "this hyer court has got gobs of time at its disposal."

"To begin at the beginning: this man and I are old acquaintances, and have done much business together. He is Stuart McKerr, the merchant-banker of Buenaventura, and I am Sandy McAlpine, formerly master of the sloop Santa Maria. This man employed me and my craft in smuggling operations, for which the law would gripe him smartly if I chose to play the informer; that is one reason why he wants me out of the way; as long as I live I am a standing menace to him. Lately he employed me on a peculiar mission. I was dispatched by him in my sloop to San Francisco to bring a girl to Santa Barbara. This girl, by name Barbara Scott, was the heiress to old Michael Scott's hidden treasures secreted somewhere in these mountains. Possibly you have heard of old Michael Scott the cattle-king."

Blake nodded; he was very much interested just now and still more astonished, for this story was like a revelation to him.

"There are two men who hungered for the treasure that the old cattle-king concealed—this man, Stuart McKerr, and the alcalde of Tejon Camp, Alexander Black. In the old time, McKerr was Scott's principal man in Buenaventura, as Black was in the mountain region. These two men, each searching for the treasure, naturally had little liking for each other, and so fearful was McKerr that Black would discover he had sent for the girl that I was instructed to land at Santa Barbara instead of Buenaventura, and McKerr, with a beacon-light, was to guide me in. During my absence these two men came together, and the result of their alliance was a plan for the destruction of the heiress and myself. The beacon-light was displayed so as to guide my craft straight onto a bar where a stranded wreck broke in the sides of my vessel, and left us all to the mercies of the roaring waves. The girl, the ill-fated heiress, Barbara, was drowned, but, by a miracle almost, I escaped. I heard in Santa Barbara that Stuart McKerr and the alcalde of Tejon Camp had been seen there together, and so I soon jumped to the conclusion that the two had joined hands and sacrificed me, and I determined to be even with this man who had acted so treacherously, and that was the reason why I attacked him."

"See hyer, gentlemen!" cried Blake, suddenly; "I guess I'll have to resign my position of judge in this business, for I've a big interest in this hidden treasure myself."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FRESH IDEA.

This intelligence excited universal astonishment, and all three of the men looked at Blake in amazement.

"Oh, I mean it, gentlemen," he continued; "it's a sure enough fact; there's no mistake about it. I've got a finger in this pie, and I find that I ain't so unprejudiced as I thought. Oh, no; it is utterly impossible for me to sit in judgment, for the way I feel about the matter I couldn't decide with an unbiased mind. I reckon that my interference has got us all into a heap of trouble, and how we are going to get out of it is a puzzle." And Blake shook his head gravely.

"I can suggest an extremely easy way!" exclaimed McKerr. "Let us put affairs back as they were when you first appeared and then you go on your way without troubling your head about this matter at all."

Sandy McAlpine's gripe was upon his weapon in an instant, bold defiance plainly written upon his face.

This idea didn't suit him at all, so he suggested another plan:

"Retire if you like, sir, and I'll engage to fight both of them single-handed and ask no better chance!" he cried.

"Well, now, that is as fair as fair can be!" Blake declared, approvingly. "That is fair for you to propose," and he nodded to Sandy, "but utterly unfair for these gentlemen to accept, for two to one is not the square thing at all, and of course you refuse," and now he nodded to the merchant and the Mexican. "You wouldn't take a mean advantage for the world, and the easiest way I know of to fix things up is for you two to decide which one of you will fight this gentleman, and so settle the difference in a straight-forward, honest way."

"Yes, but we had him foul, and why should we, having got the better of him once, be compelled to do our work over again?"

"Well, that point is not badly put," Blake admitted, slowly and reflectively, in reply to McKerr. "You did have him foul, and my arrival changed things somewhat. Now suppose I place him bound and helpless as he was before—that would suit you, eh?"

"Oh, yes!" McKerr responded.

"But go a little further back!" Sandy put in. "When this man arrived," and he pointed to the Mexican, "I held you at the muzzle of my revolver, utterly helpless!"

"That point is well taken, too!" Blake eagerly decided, much to the disgust of the two confederates. "So you see, Mr. McKerr, if it is right for me to go back and replace things as they were when I appeared, it is only fair that steps should be retraced a little further and matters fixed as they were when he appeared," and Blake pointed to the Mexican. "But, of course, you object to that."

"Yes, most decidedly!"

"There's only one way then, that I can see to straighten out this tangled snarl; and that is for you and this gentleman"—he indicated Sandy as he spoke—"to fight out your difficulty in a good square duel, and this gentleman"—and he bowed politely to the Mexican—"and myself will stand by to see fair play and bury the man that's killed. Or, as standing by will be rather tame work, and this hull thing is of the nature of a free fight we can have a little tussle together just for the fun of the thing."

The face of the Mexican strongly expressed his repugnance to this proposal. He hadn't the slightest wish to encounter in single fight the nameless shot who had so easily discomfited the giant bully of the Mohave Valley.

"Well, what do you say, gentlemen?" Blake asked, after a moment's silence. "How does the proposal suit you? Is it a go?"

"I have no quarrel with you," replied the Mexican, doggedly.

"Oh, bless you! we can easily arrange that!" cried the Fresh, quite cheerfully. "If you are one of the kind of men that has to get mad to fight, I reckon that I can stir you up in short order. Just as soon as you get ready say so, and I'll call you a horse-thief and a liar, and say that you're no gentleman, and that you can't drink, and if that ain't enough, why, I'll slap your face two or three times, and pull your nose, or knock you down and tread on you. You bet I'll wake you right up just as soon as you say so!"

The Mexican did not appear at all grateful for these little offers; his yellow face assumed a strange, unearthly hue as he ground his teeth together in impatient anger.

McKerr saw that he was in a trap; he had no mind to measure strength and weapons with Sandy McAlpine in a far and open fight, and a presentiment warned him that this bold stranger, who had come uninvited, was far more likely to favor McAlpine than to take his side in the quarrel.

"Let the matter go as it is," he remarked with an ill-grace. "You and this man can go on your way and we'll go ours. I seek no quarrel with this fellow; it was he that attacked me, and since I have baffled that attack I do not care to pursue the matter further; but I warn you, Sandy McAlpine, that if you dare to interfere in my projects I will have you hunted down and slain like a dog if it costs me every cent that I have in the world."

"Ah! see what it is to be rich!" suggested Blake, mockingly. "He that hath the ducats can buy his vengeance, but we, poor devils, not rich even in shekels, are obliged to redress our own wrongs or suffer in silence and with patience."

"Go your ways, and we'll go ours!" cried McKerr, imperiously, and with a lordly wave of his arm.

"Oh no; not so fast," Blake returned, an intonation in his voice that made the merchant feel uneasy. "For the present, your way, Stuart McKerr, lies with me!"

"With you?" exclaimed the merchant, in astonishment.

"Oh yes; I've taken a great fancy to your company, and I am going to crave the pleasure of a visit from you to me at my home in the mountains yonder."

"What do you mean?" and McKerr's hand sought the butt of his revolver, but what match was the slow and cautious merchant for the impetuous, quick-acting sport?

In a twinkling Blake had him "covered" by the self-cocking tool, so true a weapon in its master's hand.

"None of that!" he cried, "or I'll send you to your long home so quick that your master, the fiend, will not have time to prepare to receive you in a fitting manner. I told you that I had an interest in the hidden treasure of Buenaventura, and as you are one of the principal men who stand in my way I am going to carry you off with me for a while, until I can perfect my arrangements to get my hands on the valuables."

"I will not surrender with life!" McKerr cried, and in desperation he plucked forth his revolver.

"The first attempt you make to cock that weapon—the first click of the lock is the knell of your doom!" Blake replied in his cold, icy way, and a glitter in his eyes plainly betrayed that he had given utterance to no idle threat.

For a moment McKerr stood irresolute, and then, cowed by the manner of the other, he thrust his revolver back again into its pocket.

"That's right; you act like a man of sense, for to resist me would be the height of folly," Blake assured him. "Do not be alarmed; your life is safe; I do not intend to strike at that." Then he turned to McAlpine. "I am sorry to interfere in your vengeance, but in this world you know it is each for himself, and the fiend for us all."

"You saved me, sir, and I should be ungrateful indeed if I complained," McAlpine replied, with real feeling.

"You are free to depart," Blake announced, "but if you have nothing better on hand, I can offer you a chance in my little speculation, for I need just such blades as yourself."

"I'm your man," Sandy answered, glad of the chance.

"All right; and, as for you, Senor Greaser," and Blake fixed his keen eyes on the Mexican, "get back to Tejon Camp as soon as you can, and tell your cutthroat alcalde that I have taken this Buenaventura rogue up into the mountains to have an interview with the lad whom he called Miguel Scott and that, if he is anxious to see either one or the other, to follow on the trail, for it will not be a hidden one; but warn him to bring a good force at his back or else he may be handled more roughly than will be pleasant. *Vamos!*"

The Mexican did not wait for a second bidding, but took to his heels and soon disappeared around the bend of the trail.

"Do you understand what my plan is?" Blake inquired, addressing the merchant after the bravo had taken flight. "I take you with me to the mountains on purpose to draw the alcalde from Tejon Camp, and I hold out the bait, too, that the young Californian is with me. I want to meet this bulldog alcalde and his cutthroats in a good square fight, and if my Wolves and I can't whip him and his men, why, then, my sports ain't the boys I take them to be. I calculate to draw the alcalde and his forces into an ambush; then I'm going to cut his body-guard all to pieces, and either kill him or take him prisoner. I want him out of the way, for this hidden treasure that the old cattle-king left is right in Alex Black's clutches if he only knew where to look for it."

McKerr listened in perfect amazement; the knowledge of Blake astounded him. It seemed like magic.

"And now, sir," Blake continued, "I trust that you will excuse me if I take the precaution of disarming you. Mr. McAlpine, will you have the kindness to relieve this gentleman of his weapons?"

Sandy was quick to obey the request, and McKerr was obliged to submit to be disarmed, which he did with a very ill-grace indeed, but he was completely in the power of his captor, and fully realized that resistance was useless.

"Take care of his weapons; I rather think that you will find them all useful before you are a day older, unless the alcalde of Tejon Camp is a different sort of man from what I take him to be, for I fancy the moment he hears that I have carried this gentleman off to the mountains, he will follow on the trail immediately with all the force he can muster, but he'll meet with a warm reception, for we Wolves of the mountains know what is due to such a distinguished cutthroat as Alex Black. And now we'll be off."

Blake led the way; the prisoner followed, while McAlpine brought up the rear, and up into the wild mountain region they went.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MESSAGE.

The strange woman who had so astounded the alcalde with the disclosure of her name and business, sat by the window in her room gazing out upon the quiet street of the mining camp, and ever and anon she drummed listlessly upon the dingy window-pane.

Wild and random fancies were passing rapidly across her mind. She had dared as few women

would dare, to venture in this rough region, and now for the first time doubt had seized her for its prey.

Would she succeed? would she, a weak woman gain the prize, the hidden treasures of Buenaventura, for which strong, wily and unscrupulous men were toiling?

Wrestling with busy thoughts her eyes were wandering vacantly out upon the almost deserted streets, for Tejon Camp during the day wore a Sunday-like stillness, when the figure of an odd, uncouth man attracted her gaze.

This fellow, a middle-aged, long-legged chap, extremely seedily attired, was coming up the street, and upon perceiving the female face at the window, he halted, indulged in a most elaborate bow, then made a bee-line for the door of the saloon of the Alcalde's Ranch.

The girl paid no attention to the fellow, for, since her coming to the mountain region, she had grown used to the homage almost invariably paid her by the rough miners.

The man, who was no other than the new arrival Major Jake Smith, of Arkansas, whom Alex Black had so aptly termed the champion liar, entered the saloon, nodded in the most friendly manner to the barkeeper, who, truth to tell, looked upon the major in quite a suspicious way, for since the Arkansian's arrival in Tejon Camp he had not been favored with a sight of the color of Smith's money, although the pilgrim had taken quite a number of social drinks at the expense of the open-hearted Tejon Campites.

The major was not at all abashed at the barkeeper's rather unfriendly looks, for his open, genial nature scorned the idea of being on bad terms with the man who presided over the mystic barrier behind which King Whisky and his cohorts were entrenched.

"I see she's arrived!" he exclaimed, and he nodded skyward as he spoke. "No, nothing fur me to-day, thank ye," he added, with a polite bow, just as if he fancied that the active barkeeper was about to "set 'em up." "No, I jest see'd her at the window as I came up the street, and I reck'd that I'd call in and see how she was arter her journey. Oh, me and her is old pals, you know; I use to keep down at the shop-show up to Frisco whar she pitched 'em the high tragedy. And I tell ye what it is, pard, it's a mighty lucky thing for me that she's put in an appearance in this hyer Camp jes' as she has, fur I'm about down to bed rock and nary chance kin I see in this hyer region to make a rich strike. I reckon that if she's flush she won't mind 'staking' an old pard, what's had a rough time of it lately."

"I reckon that if she 'stakes' you she'll never see the color of her money again!" the young man exclaimed, contemptuously.

"Oh, I'm square, I am—the clean, white article, and no mistake," the major replied, in a tone which clearly betrayed that his feelings were injured by the doubt.

The barkeeper sniffed, suspiciously.

"Wal, I'll go up and try my luck, anyway; and I say, seeing as how you are so mighty unsartin in your opinion of me, I'll jest go you ten dollars for greens that I make a stake outen her!" the major exclaimed, proudly.

"Put up your money, old man!" cried the barkeeper, promptly. He felt perfectly sure that a single dollar would bluff the major, let alone ten.

"Ain't my word good?"

"Your money is better."

"Oh, well, we can't bet then, since you doubt me but I'm going to try the rifle anyway."

"No hurt to try, but she's no flat," replied the other, sententiously.

"Mebbe not, but for the sake of old times, I reckon she won't go back on a feller she knows!" And then the aged vagabond betook himself up-stairs.

No fool was Major Jake Smith, but possessed of a great deal more brains than most people gave him credit for. The lady was an utter stranger to him; he had only seen her once before in his life and that was when she rode into the Camp, but of course who and what she was, and why she sought the mining region soon became noised abroad.

The major had been intrusted with a message to deliver to the lady, but he was sorely afraid he would not be permitted to see her, for he knew very well that he did not stand in very good repute with the Alcalde's Ranch people, and so he devised the innocent fiction that he and the strange lady were old acquaintances, trusting that, as an old friend, he would be allowed to see her.

The device had succeeded excellently, for he was permitted to freely up-stairs.

Chuckling in his sleeve at the success of his ruse, he knocked at the door of the room occupied by the lady.

She came at once in answer to his knock.

"I beg your pardon, marm, for intrudin', but I've got a message for you, which I was told to give to you privately."

The girl had passed through so many strange experiences during the last few days of her life that she was not surprised at anything now, so she invited the major to enter, and courteously placed a chair for him.

"Thar's a party wants to see you, marm, and he's a-waiting for you jest outside the Camp, on the trail that leads down the river, and he says that he's got some important business, and he'd like to have you come right away, if you kin make it convenient."

"Who is the person?" the girl asked.

"He's an Injun, marm—says he's called the Buster, or something of that sort."

"Jose El Embustero?"

"That's it, marm, that's it, to a hair!"

"Very well; I will go at once." The girl rose to her feet, and then she cast a glance at the messenger, an idea having evidently occurred to her. "Can I trust you to keep this matter a secret?"

"Kin you trust me!" the major exclaimed. "Wal now, you kin bet a heap of money on that. Oh, I'm jest the man to tie to."

The lady had her own ideas in regard to this statement, but she took out her purse and put a glittering golden eagle into the hand of the major, a proceeding which caused the faded eyes of the old vagabond to sparkle with an unnatural light.

"Keep this matter to yourself, for I don't want all the people in the Camp to know my business," she said; "and if I do well here, perhaps I may be able to put some more money in your way."

"Oh, I'll be as dumb as an oyster!" the major

shook, and then he backed out of the room, assuring the girl as he departed that he was "just the right kind of man to tie to."

The major went straight down to the saloon, astonished the barkeeper by flipping the gold coin on the counter, and requested him to "set 'em up, just once for greens."

And while the major was occupied in disposing of the social glass, a proceeding in which he had invited the fluid-dispenser to join, the lady passed out into the street and walked rapidly away toward the appointed spot.

As we have said, the street was almost deserted, and so there were few persons to watch the girl's footsteps.

Soon she passed beyond the limits of the little camp, following the trail which led down the river, turned the slight bend, passing around which the view of the town was lost to the wayfarer, and just a short distance beyond the angle saw the old Indian squatting on a stone by the side of the trail.

The girl advanced directly to him, and the Indian grinned in the most friendly manner.

"How!" he exclaimed, as the girl came up to him, looking into her face in a very inquisitive way.

"I received your message and have come as requested," the girl said, looking the old man right in the eye, but with a face that was as incapable of revealing her thoughts as the face of a marble statue.

"The fool white man tell you all right, eh?" In this uncomplimentary way the Indian referred to the major.

"Yes; what do you wish of me?"

"You have heart like big mountain bear!" Jose exclaimed in admiring tones; "too bold!—too bold!" he added, slowly.

"How too bold?"

"When I drunk I not know you—I not know you now, but the face of the cattle-king has come again when I see you. Take care! This beast alcalde—he will like you as a dog he find out."

"Find out what?"

"Who you are," replied the Indian, impressively. "Have no fear that I tell. It is either your life or mine. Alcalde kill you or you kill alcalde; no get hidden treasure without."

A dark shade passed rapidly over the girl's face. Was the hidden cache of the old cattle-king after all worth the trouble which must be taken to gain it?

Such was the question that the girl put to herself, and, indeed, it was an extremely difficult one to answer.

"Trust me," the old Indian continued, "trust me, and trust no one else. The white men call me the liar, but to you I will speak nothing but the truth."

"You do not know who I am," the girl observed, slowly.

"I know what you say you are," the peon replied, immediately. "I saw you when you come to town; I crawl into ranch and hear what you say to alcalde—you fool him—he no think that you are what you are; but take care that he no finds it out; he will kill you in the spot!"

The eyes of the girl flashed fire at the words.

"He is a miserable wretch!" she cried; "but retribution is much nearer than he thinks."

"He ought to die!" the Indian exclaimed; "so much blood on his hands, all the waters of the river yonder could not wash them clean."

"Very true," the girl replied, with a face cold and rigid, for an awful thought had arisen in her mind. Could not the hidden treasure be gained except by bloodshed? Did the life of the dark alcalde indeed stand between her and the prize she sought?

Small chance was there for her to think the matter over, for just then, with a whoop and a yell, around the bend in the trail came Alex Black and a gang of his cutthroats.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AGAIN A PRISONER.

LUE sudden and unexpected appearance of the alcalde and his men is easily explained.

The bumper, with that spirit of boasting so common to certain men, must needs display the gold piece given him by the girl as a bribe to keep his mouth shut, and brag to the barkeeper of the influence which he possessed over her.

The alcalde, chancing to enter overheard his boasts, and when he understood that the lady had given him the money, he at once concluded that the fellow, by some ingenious device had extorted the gold from the girl; so he immediately accused him.

Brought fairly to bay, for Alex Black was not the man to be trifled with, the old vagabond was forced to confess the truth, and very much puzzled indeed was the alcalde when he learned that not only had the old Indian sent a message to the girl but that she at once had set forth to meet the peon.

Here was an unexpected move in the game; what on earth had the Indian to do with her or she with him? Were they in league, and was her story but a cunning trick to mislead him?

It was a difficult problem but the alcalde set about solving it at once. He called his body-guard together, and away they started—his design being to surprise the two together, and he succeeded admirably.

"We are lost!" cried the girl, as the alcalde and his men came round the bend in the trail.

There was a look of apprehension visible upon the stolid face of the Indian, for in truth he had quite a taste of the alcalde and his methods, but the ruling passion strong even in this hour of danger impelled him to say:

"Lie out of it—I know not you, nor you me!"

A very simple and ingenious plan indeed.

The alcalde and his men came on, weapons shining in their hands as though they expected to encounter a band of armed and desperate men instead of one poor old Indian and a single woman.

"Put up your weapons, boys!" the alcalde exclaimed, as they came up close to the two. "The lady ain't hurt!"

The "boys" obeyed the command at once, while the Indian looked on with a stolid face as though the performance possessed no interest at all for him.

"You really must excuse us," the alcalde said, with a very polite bow to the girl, "but I heard that you had ventured outside the town, and as it ain't safe at all to do such a thing, I raised a crowd and came after you as fast as I could."

"I was not aware that there was any danger," the girl replied.

"Oh, thar is, miss, heaps of it! the country round about here is infested with a lot of worthless vagabonds, and this old copper-skin hyer is as big a rascal as kin be scared up in a hundred miles in any direction; but, mebbe, he's a friend of yours?"

"He sent me a message that he desired to see me, that's all," the girl said, in her quiet way. "I presume that it was wrong for me to come, but the message excited my curiosity and that, you know, is generally all-powerful with a woman."

"Oh, it's all right, miss, of course, as long as you have escaped harm, but I was very much afraid that you had been decoyed into a trap, for this fellow is none too good for such work."

"Me tell white squaw where to find what she wants in the mountains, mebbe she pay good—how!" exclaimed the Indian.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" observed the alcalde, in an extremely amiable way. "Well, you shall come along with us and you can tell me, for the lady is under my protection just now, and if your information is valuable you can rest assured that you shall be amply rewarded."

A sickly sort of smile came over the dark face of the Indian and there was a restless glitter in his eyes, as he gazed from one to another in the throng and looked wistfully at the distant foot-hills. Jose, the Liar, would have given about all that he possessed just then to have escaped to the shelter of the big pines that reared their nodding green plumes on the mountain side. But both resistance and flight were out of the question; the alcalde and his band had him as safe as a rat in a trap, and the alcalde nodded significantly to a couple of the band who at once proceeded to take charge of the Indian, while Black escorted the lady.

"I tell you, miss, you gave me a terrible fright!" he exclaimed, as they proceeded up the trail toward the town. "These heathen bucks are up to all sorts of games, and I had an idea that it was all a deep-laid scheme to kidnap you."

"But who would wish to kidnap me?"

The question bothered the alcalde, for he was only trying to find a plausible excuse for his pursuit and interruption of her interview with the red-skin.

"Oh, I can't say exactly, but there's all sorts of sealawags round, you know."

"But why should any one wish to interfere with me?"

"They might get the idea in their heads that you had a lot of money, or they might carry you off into the mountains, thinking that your friends would pay a good, big ransom for you; these mountain outlaws are all up to just such games."

And in this ingenious manner did the alcalde beguile the homeward path, and he felt quite satisfied by the time they reached the Ranch, that he had succeeded in completely "pulling the wool over the eyes" of the girl.

But in this case, as it often happens in this world to tricky, deceitful men who are forever engaged in trying to conceal their own purposes and to unmask the designs of others, the alcalde deceived himself in trying to deceive the girl, for he entered the Ranch with the full conviction that the girl had indeed spoken the truth in regard to her going forth to meet the Indian, and that she really had no previous acquaintance with the red-skin. But why had the peon desired to see the girl? What was the reason that impelled him to seek an interview? The motive for this the alcalde could not guess, but he smiled grimly as he reflected that he held the red-skin securely in his power, and that he would have to answer the questions propounded to him or else suffer.

Black gallantly escorted the lady to her room, and then hurried to the alcalde's office where the red-skin had been conveyed.

The guards were lounging by the door, but keeping a vigilant eye nevertheless upon the peon who was seated upon one of the empty boxes by the table, looking as placid and contented as though he was not in the power of a man cruel and unscrupulous enough to commit any crime provided the end to be attained was of importance enough to sanction it.

The alcalde entered the room and addressing the guards bade them wait without as he desired to have some private talk with the prisoner.

The two men withdrew, and the Indian and the alcalde were left alone together.

"Now then, Jose," said the alcalde, seating himself upon the rude desk and surveying the Indian with a piercing glance, "do you think that you could tell the truth if you tried very hard?"

The red-skin grinned; he regarded this question as a sort of a compliment.

"Mebbe," he replied, briefly.

"Well, all there is to it is, that if you don't tell the truth you'll suffer," and Black tapped the butt of his revolver significantly, and the red-skin at once looked sober and sad.

"You're a smart customer, I know," Black continued, "but I want you to understand this time that you can't play any sharp tricks upon me."

The peon lifted up his hands and rolled up the whites of his eyes as much as to say that he wouldn't dream of doing such a thing.

"Now, then—don't try any gum games, mind! What did you want with this girl, and why did you send for her?"

"To make money," replied Jose, laconically.

"How make money?"

"Make b'lieve tell her where the hidden treasure is cached."

"Aha!" cried the alcalde, starting, "you know where the treasure is cached?"

"Oh, no; how should I know?" replied the peon, stolidly. "Me say, me make b'lieve know where treasure is, so make plenty money."

"Who is this girl, anyway?" cried Black, abruptly.

"She tell you she wife of Miguel Scott," observed the red-skin, shrewdly.

"Why, how did you know that?"

"Jose got long ears—listen at the door when she first come."

"Well, old fellow, you're more knave than fool, after all," Black exclaimed.

Again the peon grinned; he regarded this as another compliment.

"And so when you found out that this girl claimed

to be the wife of Miguel Scott you determined to strike her for a stake."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it's all right; each man to his game; I'm sorry that I was obliged to spoil yours, but it couldn't be helped; and now, to talk right to the point, Jose. I believe that you do know where the treasure is cached in the mountains and that you could lead me right direct to the spot if you choose."

Earnestly the peon protested that it was not so.

"Oh, you can deny it all you like," the alcalde replied, positively, "I am satisfied that you do know, and all that bothers me is to decide which is the best way to compel you to tell."

"Jose can no tell what he does not know," the Indian asserted, sententiously.

"That's very true, but the bird that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing!" and Black knitted his brows and looked at the Indian in a particularly threatening way.

The red-skin folded his arms with true Indian dignity.

"Mebbe you kill Jose; he no tell then more than now."

The eyes of the alcalde glistened; he closed his teeth tightly, and then shook his clenched fist menacingly in the face of the red-skin.

"I'll have your blood, drop by drop, but you shall tell before I get through with you!" the alcalde cried, his face dark with rage.

CHAPTER XXXII.

STARTLING NEWS.

AT this point the conversation was suddenly and rudely interrupted. Into the office rushed the Mexican, breathless with haste.

The alcalde at once guessed what had happened, for he knew the nature of Lope Dumas only too well; impatient to dip his hands in blood he had provoked McAlpine to an encounter and slain him.

"Did you settle him?" he asked, speaking as carelessly as though the question did not relate to the death of a fellow mortal.

"Coramba! no! the fellow escaped!" the Mexican replied, and then glanced at the Indian. The alcalde understood that affairs had not progressed favorably, and that Lope desired to speak with him in private.

"I will return in a moment," he said to the peon, and then passed out of the office, followed by the Mexican.

Black did not hesitate to leave the Indian alone within, for the single window, which afforded light to the office, and which was the only means of egress from the room besides the door, was situated in the front of the building, and therefore it was impossible for the Indian to escape without being observed.

"Blazes is to pay, alcalde!" cried the Mexican, the moment that he and his superior were outside of the office, and then timidly he related what had occurred.

The alcalde listened in astonishment, and for a moment hardly knew what to make of the matter.

"The dare-devil sport and the Californian are in league, then, as I expected," he said, at last. "The young man is Miguel Scott, beyond the shadow of a doubt! And the sport defies me, does he?"

"He does indeed!"

"And he has carried off the banker to the mountains?"

"Yes, and dares you to follow!"

"I have heard of these mountain outlaws and it is about time that some one gave them a lesson. Go, get the men together, fifteen or twenty of the best that you can muster; see that they are well armed, and that every man takes a good supply of ammunition with him. If I once get on the trail I'll hunt these Wolves out of their holes if it takes the better part of a month."

"Oh, there will not be much difficulty about finding them, for this sport means fight, every time!"

"We'll give him all he wants," the alcalde exclaimed, grimly. "But, hurry up the men; we want to strike on the trail while it is fresh and before it grows cold."

"I'll have 'em ready in half an hour!"

"Pack up a good supply of provisions, too, on the back of a mule, so that we won't be obliged to come back to the camp until we hunt these fellows to their holes!"

The alcalde was terribly in earnest.

The Mexican hurried off and then with brows compressed and a sober, thoughtful face, the alcalde re-entered the office, prepared to bring the examination to a close.

But that was destined not to be, for—

The room was empty.

The alcalde glared around him in amazement, but keen and excellent as were his eyes still they were not good enough to discover the person of the old peon.

In cunning craft Jose, the Liar, was fully a match for any white man who ever stepped foot on Californian soil.

The manner of the Indian's escape was quite apparent. He had simply, by means of some sharp instrument which he had concealed about his person—a knife, evidently—tunneled a passage right under the back wall of the office; there was no floor to the building other than the ground upon which it stood.

An exclamation of anger came from the lips of the dark alcalde at being thus easily tricked. Twice had the old peon slipped through his fingers after being securely caught.

Rapidly, indeed, had the Indian worked, for Black had not been absent over ten minutes, and it was plain that in order to accomplish the task Jose must have at once set to work the very moment that the door had closed behind the alcalde.

From the rear of the office it was an easy matter to gain the wooded foot-hills, only a hundred yards distant, and once this shelter was reached, no easy task would it have been for a dozen of the fleetest and the best men in Tejon Camp to overtake the red buck, for Jose was as good on his legs as a wild deer, almost; and knew, too, every foot of the country.

"The deuce take that fellow!" the alcalde cried in wrath; "the next time I get my hands upon him I'll have him tied neck and heels so that he can't move even a finger and a crowd shall watch him constantly!"

"For the present, let him go," he muttered. "The

get hold of him again some time, and if he slips out of my fingers a third time, why, then I am a bigger fool than I think I am! The fellow evidently knows something or else he would not be so anxious to escape."

Blake now sought the hotel to prepare for the expedition. He went straight to his private room and armed himself, carefully examining each and every weapon, for he fully realized that if the Fresh of Frisco was properly backed, it would be no child's play to hunt him down in his mountain fastness; but the dark-browed alcalde had been used to having his own way so long, and had been so completely master of the Mohave valley and the mountain region adjoining, that it did not seem possible to him that any one could succeed in offering successful resistance to his power.

In just about thirty minutes from the time that he had departed the Mexican returned with the intelligence that everything was in readiness for the expedition. The men, all carefully picked and armed, were in the saloon, and the mule, laden with provisions, was at the door.

The alcalde sallied forth at once.

The members of the band were indeed well prepared for rough service. Each and every man had a couple of revolvers belted to his waist, a keen-edged, broad-bladed knife thrust through his girdle, and a rifle slung on his back.

The fierce alcalde's eyes glistened as he looked on the warlike array; good judge as he was of men and matters in this wild Pacific land, it did not seem possible to him that such a band could be beaten by a skulking mountain outlaw.

"Take a parting drink, boys," he said, "and fill your flasks up, for we may have a long tramp of it before we return to the camp."

The men eagerly accepted the offer, and after they had satisfied themselves, filed out into the street.

The alcalde lingered behind to say a parting word to the barkeeper, who was one of his most trusted men.

"Keep your eyes open in regard to the girl," he said, "and if any one comes to see her, watch and overhear the conversation if you can, and if she goes out have her followed, for she must not stir without my knowing the why and the wherefore."

"All right, sir; how soon will she come back?"

"Come back!" cried Blake, in amazement.

"Yes, sir; didn't you know she had gone out?"

"Indeed, I did not."

"Yes, sir, she has."

"How long since?"

"About ten minutes. I thought she was going with you, for she came down, went round to the stable, got her horse and rode slowly up the street just as if she was killing time till you got ready."

"By the eternal fires below! she has tricked me!" cried the alcalde, bringing his clenched fist down with a bang upon the bar. "It is a hundred dollars to a cent that she is in league with that young Californian and that dare-devil sport; but, I'll follow hard upon her track for I've no doubt that she has gone to join the others in the mountains. She came back here to play the spy upon me, but my interruption of the interview between her and the old Indian alarmed her; she knew that I held the red-skin in my power and she was afraid that I would frighten him into a confession, and that was the reason why she got out. Cursed fool that I was not to suspect that there was something wrong!"

"I could have stopped her, but I thought that it was all right."

"It is not your fault; I do not blame you; I only blame myself for allowing her to pull the wool over my eyes; but I had no idea that she was smart enough to do anything of the kind. I'll have her, though, before the sun sets this day unless she is smarter than I think she is!" And then, with rage rankling in his heart, the alcalde strode out into the street and took command of his men.

The Mexican took the lead, placing himself in the advance, and the alcalde, followed by the band, came hard after.

Lope led directly to the spot where the interview between the four men had taken place as described in a previous chapter.

"It was here that I parted with them," the Mexican said, as he reached the place, "and they struck off up the trail."

"If they were bound for the mountains they probably took the old Indian trail which branches off to the right about a quarter of a mile further on."

The alcalde's guess was correct, as the party discovered upon reaching the junction of the two trails, for the bold sport, in derision and defiance, and to make good his word that he would not seek to hide his trail, had torn a pine branch away from the parent tree and cast it down to serve as a guide to the pursuers.

The brows of the alcalde knitted as he beheld this plain token that the Fresh not only did not fear but courted pursuit.

He kept his thoughts to himself, though, and spoke no word as he led on his band, but, for the first time he began to realize that he had taken no easy task upon his shoulders when he had undertaken to hunt to his lair the man who claimed the rough "Wolves" of Tejon Pass as his friends.

Fast on the trail the band proceeded, the way plainly indicated every here and there by the broken ranches cast upon the ground.

Up—up into the heavily-wooded mountain region the band went, the way growing wilder and more desolate at every step.

The band kept a firm gripe upon their weapons, and cast many a wary glance about them, for they suspected danger.

They entered upon a rocky, elevated plateau, when, suddenly, from behind a massive rock, rose the well-known figure of the daring sport, the Fresh of Frisco.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

So suddenly did the sport arise from his place of concealment that for a moment the astonished men gazed upon him with wonder-stricken eyes, just as if he had been an airy spirit from another world, rather than the bold mortal of solid flesh and blood which he was.

Blake was dressed exactly the same as he had been when he first made his appearance in the min-

ing camp, no sign of arms or traces of hostile intent, but he rose as quietly and faced the well-armed band, who were evidently on blood and slaughter bent, as calmly as though there were no bad blood between himself and the desperate men of Tejon Camp.

No sign of arms the sport displayed, we say, and each and every member of the invading band noted this fact at the first glance, but Blake was no stranger to them now, and they all understood that the man of ice and iron never was more dangerous than when he smiled and appeared harmless.

"Halt!" he cried, as he rose in view. And the promptitude with which the advancing band stopped, rooted as it were in their places, when the command reached their ears, was something wonderful.

"How are ye, alcalde!" Blake continued. "I feel quite delighted at seeing you so near my hunting-grounds. You extended to me the hospitalities of Tejon Camp only a little while ago, and now it is my turn."

"You are a bold, impudent blade!" the alcalde exclaimed, scowling darkly, "but I give you fair warning that I am in no mood for joking to-day and that I'm here on business."

"So I suppose, judging from the looks of your escort."

"You and Sandy McAlpine have been riding a pretty high horse and it is about time that you, and all like you, understood that I don't allow any such going on in my neighborhood. I've come after Stuart McKerr, and if you know when you are well off you will surrender him at once and give yourself up at the same time; otherwise I may be obliged to make an example of you so as to deter other rash men from attempts to dispute my power in this hyer region."

"Oho! you think that you are supreme master here, then?" retorted Blake, in a tone which was extremely exasperating.

"You will find, before you are an hour older, that I am master hyer!" the alcalde angrily responded.

"I'll go you to one on that!" the Fresh cried. "I'm master hyer, my man! Did you ever hear of the Wolves of Tejon?"

"A band of cutthroats that I'll string up to the pines on these hillsides one of these days like onions on a rope as a warning!" the alcalde exclaimed, defiantly.

"As a warning that you don't want any cutthroats around except the scoundrels that follow your lead?" Blake suggested, and at this home-thrust there came up, like an echo from amid the rocks and stunted pines, a sort of chorus of deep "Haw-haws!" an ominous, specter-like sound that caused the alcalde and his men to grasp their weapons and glare earnestly and anxiously around them.

Blake smiled as he beheld the astonishment and alarm of the invaders.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, gentlemen!" he cried in his light and airy way. "It's only one of our odd mountain echoes. We have very strange echoes up here in the mountains, sometimes."

From the alcalde downward there wasn't a man in the band but understood that the cool but desperate sport was making game of them. His confident manner puzzled them. Had they been led into a trap? Had the trail purposely been made plain and easy so as to entice them up into this wild and desolate spot and into an ambushade?

It looked like it, for, to the fevered imaginations of the astonished band, the chorus of invisible "haw-haws!" seemed to come from a score of throats, and to entirely encircle the little glade wherein they stood.

Anxious then were the looks that the band cast around them, and dark the angry scowl upon their rugged features.

They were all bold and careless men, reckless of their own lives and of the lives of others, yet, bold and reckless as they were, and as cheap as they held their lives, it was not agreeable to think that they had walked blindly into an ambushade, and that they were at the mercy of a concealed foe who only waited for a given signal to pour in a deadly fire upon them.

"And now, my bold alcalde," continued Blake, "since you have delivered your ultimatum, just listen to mine. You are all utterly at my mercy. You have walked into a trap from whence, for the greater part of you, there is no deliverance except by a descent into the valley of death, and how many of you bold, rough scoundrels are ready to die?"

If the question had been put to them in the town of Tejon Camp, not a man in the band but would have protested stoutly that he held his life no dearer than a pin's fee, and was ready at all times to risk it, and would at once have fought unto the death any rash man who dared to say to the contrary; but in this wild spot, this bit of unknown ground, confronted by a man whose equal for cool hardihood had never yet stepped foot in the Mohave valley, these men of bloody, reckless lives felt the warm courage oozing out at their finger-ends, and the cold taint of fear beginning to sap their stout hearts.

"That is a question that you had better ask yourself and prepare at once to answer it!" the alcalde cried, roughly.

"And why should I prepare to answer it?" Blake asked, with that arrogant coolness which in him was so exasperating.

"Why?" the alcalde fairly shouted. "Why? Don't you understand, my bold buck, that we have come after you and the boy whose quarrel you have so rashly taken upon your shoulders, and now that we have run you to earth, all that you can do is to surrender at once or else, inside of five minutes, there'll be one bold sport the less in California?"

Blake laughed in contempt.

"You pig-headed fool!" he exclaimed; "do you suppose that if I was helpless and without backing, I would have allowed you to track me so easily? Oh, no! It was my game to lead you on, to lure you into a trap, from whence with life you will never escape. You are completely surrounded by my men, not one of your force but is covered by trusty weapons in the hands of sharpshooters whose superiors ain't to be found on all this hyer Pacific slope. I just rose out of my ambush to give you fair warning—to save the shedding of blood, if you are at all inclined to listen to reason. I've no quarrel with all of you men, but this gentleman, my bold alcalde, is my mutton; and now I've got him just where I want him. The rest of you can git!"

For answer the alcalde deliberately raised his rifle and pulled back the hammer.

"Is it war?" Blake cried; "look out for yourself then!"

The alcalde pulled the trigger, but at the very moment that the piece was discharged, Blake dodged down behind the rock which had previously sheltered him and the bullet whistled harmlessly over his head.

Sharply rung the crack of the alcalde's rifle on the still mountain air, and a dozen echoes, each one as strong as the original report, repeated the sound.

No empty, harmless echoes, these phantom-like "cracks" either, for the leaden bullets came whistling from the stubby clumps of pines and from the cover of the bowlders, behind which the secret foe was ambushed.

No foolish boast had the Fresh of Frisco made when he had declared that he had the invaders in a trap.

The effect of the volley was terrible—six of the alcalde's men were down, either slain outright or badly hurt.

And the deadly fire continued, too, dropping, irregular shots, the fire of the skirmish line, for the ambushed men were so near to the entrapped alcalde and his force that they were using their six-shooters now.

No matter how brave the men were, individually—it was not in human nature to stand and give battle against such overwhelming advantages.

A few wild, random shots the alcalde's men fired and then they broke and fled! "Each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost," was their motto.

Even the alcalde followed in the flight, carried away by the sudden rush, and then from their covert rose Blake and his band, and followed in pursuit.

Fast raced the fugitives over the rude and broken ground, and fast the pursuers followed.

Blake and Sandy McAlpine had marked the alcalde for their prey, and untiringly as the gaunt prairie wolf on the trail of the wounded buffalo, they followed the desperate, defeated master of Tejon Camp.

Ten times at least Blake, with his wonderful marksmanship, could have "dropped" the fugitive with a snap-shot, as he caught sight of his broad back as he raced through the scrubby pines, or clambered over the jagged rocks, but the Fresh refrained. He wished to take alive the bold spirit, who had so long with an iron hand ruled over the Mohave valley; he hungered to put him through some of the "sprouts" that the Black men of Tejon had practiced upon him.

The two pursuers began to gain upon the fleeing man, and he, understanding that he could expect no mercy from either one, determined to sell his life dearly.

The alcalde preferred to die rather than fall into the hands of the men whom he had wronged. He felt that his strength was failing, and that he could continue his fight but a little while longer, and though he had doubled and twisted around like a hunted hare yet he could not throw his eager pursuers off the track.

A desperate man indeed, he determined to turn and fight for his life although the odds were against him.

Crafty was the move he made.

Coming to a little open space he raced across it for dear life and plunged into the pines beyond, but the moment he was sheltered by the timber he turned, and taking deliberate aim at Blake, as he advanced into the opening, fired, but the Fresh was on his guard, and the moment he noticed that the hunted man had stopped he flung himself upon his face.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

Not a whit too soon was Blake's action, for the well-aimed bullet of the desperate alcalde whizzed by him not a foot above his head. If the wonderful instinct of the Fresh had not warned him that danger threatened the instant he discovered from the sudden stoppage of the noise made by the fugitive in his flight, that the alcalde had halted, this brief, but exact, chronicle would have come to a sudden end, for the death of the hero should always end the tale.

But, Blake was well up in frontier tricks, and the moment he discovered that the alcalde had halted in his headlong flight he understood that the desperate man, determined to sell his life dearly, had resolved upon resistance.

McAlpine seeing Blake dodge down, followed his example. Although they were two to one yet the pursuers did not think it prudent to attempt to advance, for the alcalde, entrenched behind the rocks, was pretty certain to hit one or both of them.

The only thing to be done was to flank the fugitive in his well-chosen position.

Neither McAlpine nor the Fresh were the kind of men to let the grass grow under their feet in an adventure of this kind, and so immediately, and without consultation, they began to work round in a half circle to attack the alcalde in the rear.

All was still as death; the quiet of the great primeval forest reigned, for the two men skulked, along, stealing forward to their design with all the cautious stealth of the red son of the wilderness from whom they had learned the cunning trick.

But their craft and skill alike were set at naught; the alcalde was no novice in woodcraft, and he had taken advantage of the stoppage of the hot pursuit to steal away.

He had halted only long enough to fire the shot and force his opponents to take cover, and then, silently as a snake, had retreated.

McAlpine and Blake came face to face right behind the bowlder which had served the alcalde so well.

An angry exclamation came from the lips of the adventurer, but Blake only laughed; the trick, being shrewdly played, only served to amuse him, for the Fresh was one of those peculiar natures who are as quick to admire a cunning device in a foe as to praise it in a friend.

"He has escaped us," McAlpine cried.

"Yes, and I underrated the man, for I had no idea that he was up to such a dodge. I took him to be a bull-headed bravo who would, when cornered, put his back against a rock and die like a gentleman, selling his life as dearly as possible."

"He who fights and runs away," quoted Sandy.

"Will live to fight another day," eh?" cried Blake, finishing the quotation.

"Let us pursue him at once!"

"What, after the start that he has got?"

"I think that I am woodman enough to lift the trail."

"Do you think you can over these bare rocks that leave no mark of human footsteps?"

"Yes," replied Sandy, confidently.

"Well go ahead; that sort of thing is out of my line."

McAlpine in truth was a pretty good tracker, and almost as good on the trail of a flying foe as any red devil that ever lifted hair, and the alcalde in his headlong flight had not taken any pains to disguise his trail; in fact, he had no time to accomplish this if he had wished to; and so, in spite of the bad nature of the ground which rendered the task a difficult one indeed, McAlpine soon "lifted the trail," in mountain parlance, and fast he and Blake followed in the footsteps of the flying man.

Little hope had the Fresh, though, of overtaking the fugitive, for he reasoned shrewdly that with the start that the alcalde had gained, such a thing would be almost impossible. And so it proved; for, after following the trail clear down to the foothills, where it struck the regular old Indian path, and was lost amid a dozen other footprints, the pursuers were forced to give up the chase.

"Satan himself protects this man!" McAlpine exclaimed, in anger, as he came to an unwilling halt.

"No doubt, no doubt!" Blake replied, in a tone of perfect conviction, "and the big chief with horns and tail has no better servant than the alcalde of Tejon Camp."

"I had a chance at the scoundrel three or four times, but I waited until I could be sure of my game," Sandy remarked, in a regretful tone.

"And so missed it altogether!" Blake cried, laughing. "Now, in future take pattern by me—always 'pull' on a man if you think you have half a chance of hitting him; that's my rule always, and it's these snap-shots—nearly all of which are more luck than marksmanship—that have given me the reputation of being one of the best men at the trigger on the coast."

"I'll crack at him the next time, whether I think that I can hit him or not!"

"And that next time will come very soon," Blake remarked, as they struck back into the upper trail again.

"The sooner the better!" Sandy replied.

"I reckon that in this little affair to-day we have laid out one-half or two-thirds of the best fighting-men the alcalde could muster in his cutthroat camp, and now I think that the man who takes Alex Black by the beard won't have to be backed by an army."

Significant words when coming from the lips of Jackson Blake.

Leaving the two to retrace their way to the stronghold of the Wolves, in the mountain, we will follow the footsteps of the defeated ruler of the Mohave valley.

Black had quite a reputation for a great many fights among the Tejon Campites; but, as a runner, he had never been counted much, yet it is quite doubtful if there existed a man in all the Mohave valley, white or red, who could have beaten his "time" that day.

Winded and weary, full of rage at his defeat, and swearing great schemes of vengeance upon the man who had so completely beaten him at his own bold game, the alcalde approached the mining town, and, just at the same moment, from different points in the foothills, came other breathless and haggard men, one and all bearing evident marks of the terrible exertion which they had made.

The alcalde halted and surveyed them with eyes aflamed with rage—not with rage toward them, but toward the cunning foe who had so roughly handled them.

It was the first time since the founding of Tejon Camp that the alcalde and his bold fighting-men had ever been compelled to skulk home like beaten curs.

The men gave ample proof of the desperate nature of the struggle through which they had passed, for one and all were bleeding from ugly wounds. The flight and the hot pursuit had been as bad as the battle, terrible as had been the surprise of the ambush. The alcalde had been the only man who had been fortunate enough to escape without a wound.

Five men straggled forth from the pines of the foothills and came doggedly forward to meet their leader, and each and every man shook his head as he came up to the alcalde, as much as to say: "It wasn't my fault; my blood and wounds show that I fought like a tiger!"

"And are you all that is left?" cried the alcalde, with blazing eyes, as he looked upon the faces of the poor, stout men who had so often backed his quarrels.

"Caramba!" exclaimed the Mexican, who had been one of the fortunate ones, and succeeded in escaping with only a slight flesh wound, "I think that there is not many more. What would you have? They slaughtered us like sheep in that trap, and then chased us through the mountains like so many devils. By the bones of all the saints! I never ran so fast before since I was born!"

"Five—only five left!" the alcalde cried, seemingly unable to convince himself that the massacre could have been so terrible.

"Why, half of us went down at the first fire before we had a chance to return a shot!" another one of the band exclaimed.

"And then they followed us as we fled as fast and as close as our shadows!" the Mexican ejaculated.

"Caramba!" if I live to be a thousand years old, I shall never forget this day's work!"

"Nor I—nor I," the alcalde repeated, slowly. "Well, it's done now and can't be undone, but our turn will come, boys, and then we'll pay back what we owe for this day's work with double interest."

The members of the gang made wry faces at each other; they were quite satisfied to let the matter stand as it was; they had not the slightest desire to ever face the dare-devil sport and his followers again.

"You had better enter the ranch by the back door, boys," Black suggested. "I don't care about every one in the town knowing that these fellows have

flaxed us; and mind, keep a still tongue in your heads about what has transpired to-day."

Of course they swore that they wouldn't breathe a word to mortal, and then they all proceeded to the hotel.

The alcalde went at once to his private apartment and washed off the stains of the battle and flight, then proceeded to recharge his weapons. Hardly had this been done when the door opened, and Stuart McKerr, pale and agitated, walked into the room.

The alcalde started to his feet in surprise.

"Aha! you have escaped!" he cried.

"No; I was released to bring you a message."

"A message?"

"Yes, a challenge to mortal combat."

And before the alcalde could cry aloud his astonishment at this, the loud, bold voice of Jackson Blake rung out, clear as the tone of the herald's trumpet, in the street of the mining camp!

CHAPTER XXXV.

A BOLD DEFIANCE.

"WHERE is this man, Alexander Black, the alcalde of this hyar Camp?" Blake cried. "Where is he? He's the man I want; bring him out that I may spit in his face and tell him to his teeth that he is a cowardly cutthroat—a villain—a murderer of the deepest dye!"

The alcalde grasped his weapons and started to his feet, his face inflamed with anger, and no wonder, for it was not pleasant to be thus bearded and defied, right in his own town.

"He followed me quicker than I thought!" the merchant exclaimed. "He released me and told me to go straight to Tejon Camp and inform you that he was coming in person to seek satisfaction."

"The cursed idiot!" Black muttered; "his success in the mountains has intoxicated him, and now he has placed himself in my power."

"Don't be too sure of that," McKerr warned. "I think you will find he hasn't come alone, but has a good strong force at his back."

"He'll find that he has walked into a hornet's nest before he gets out of this town!" the alcalde retorted, although as he spoke the thought flashed across his mind of how many good, bold ruffians had been laid low that day in the fearful fight in the mountains, the very picked men of the town, and he began to count over in his mind the number of fighting-men whom he could depend upon to assist him in driving this bold invader from the Camp.

If he could only succeed in raising the whole Camp, the destruction of the Fresh and his cohorts was undoubted, but it was a question whether he could succeed in doing so.

Already the daring sport had won a name for himself in the annals of Tejon Camp, and the alcalde felt that it would be no easy task to rouse the miners to take action against him in a merely personal quarrel, and whether he was strong enough to give battle to the bold challenger, assisted only by his own men, was a question that could only be decided by actual trial.

And if he failed—Ah! the alcalde did not want to think of that, for he fully realized that, in this struggle, it was either victory or death—there could be no half-way about it.

"This cock is crowing pretty loud, but if I get a bead on him I reckon I'll put a leaden pill into him that will be mighty apt to cha ge his note," cried the alcalde, as he marched out into the saloon, revolver in hand. It was his intention to fire at the bold invader through the window, for the alcalde was a dark and tricky scoundrel who scorned a fair and open fight when he could take a mean advantage.

The saloon was deserted, with the exception of the presiding genius behind the bar, who looked sober and shook his head dubiously when his chief appeared.

"Where are the boys?" the alcalde asked, perceiving that none of the gang were around.

"All up-stairs."

"Call them, for I reckon that there is going to be trouble."

"Oh, this cuss means business, every time," the other remarked, as he departed on his mission.

The alcalde cautiously approached the window and looked out. His revolver, ready cocked, was in his hand, and he was fully prepared to fire if he could get a favorable chance; but Black had to deal with a man fully as crafty as himself, although the Fresh would have scorned to use his craft to gain an unfair advantage of a foe. After promulgating his bold defiance, Blake had retired up the street to a safe distance, and, sheltering himself behind the angle of a house, waited for the coming forth of his foe.

The Fresh was accompanied by eight men, including Sandy McAlpine and the young Californian. The entire party were on foot, but armed to the teeth, and as Black from the window looked forth upon and counted the party, he fully realized that unless he succeeded in rousing the miners of the town and induced them to join him, he stood very little chance of driving the assailants from the Camp.

The gang headed by the barkeeper came slowly down into the saloon; they had bound up their wounds and recharged their weapons, but they evidently had no wish at all to encounter the men who had previously handled them so roughly.

A single glance the alcalde took at the faces of his men, and then felt satisfied that he would never be able to induce them to stand against Blake and his force.

But could he rouse the town? Doubtful, even if he had the chance, which at present seemed denied him, for the Camp was almost deserted now, the men being at work in the mountain gulches, more or less distant from the town, and with Blake in full possession of the Camp while he was shut up in the house, the Fresh had a much better chance of presenting his side of the question than was afforded to his enemy.

The face of the alcalde was fairly black with passion; never before in the whole course of his life of adventure had he been so fairly brought to bay, and with so little chance of escaping from the perilous position.

And while the alcalde, chafing with rage, was eagerly seeking some escape from the trap, Blake took advantage of the chance to explain the situation to the few townsmen who gathered around him,

attracted by the bold and ringing defiance which he had uttered.

"This thief of an alcalde has carried matters with a high hand too long in this valley!" he declared. "I came here, a stranger, bearing malice to no man within the limits of this Camp, and willing to abide by the laws which are in force to govern you all here. But that didn't suit the alcalde. He asked what business I followed, and I told him honestly and frankly that I never bothered my head much about business but depended upon my skill in card-playing to get a living, and then he coolly informed me that he didn't think there was any opening in Tejon Camp for a man about my size, but that the quicker I got out the better, unless I would join his gang, for he needed just such a man as myself. And then at night he had a gang of masked men—the Black Men of Tejon, as they called themselves—seize me as I lay asleep, and they carried me down into a cave where they were going to burn out my eyes with red-hot irons and indulge in a few other pkeasantries of a like nature, but I managed to slip out of their fingers, and now I've come back, fellow-citizens, to square the account with this great mogul who thinks that he owns all this hyer valley; but he don't own me, and while I stand in my boots I will not allow any man to tread on me without calling him to an account. And that's why I'm hyer, backed by these few friends, who kindly came along to see fair play, or, if the alcalde's gang were willing, to take a hand in the fuss themselves. I bear no ill-will to Tejon Camp or to the men of Tejon Camp; in fact I put myself forward to deliver you from the tyranny of this Alex Black who has lorded it over the Mohave valley long enough. He don't own this land, fellow-citizens, not an inch of it, although he has set up a claim to it; it belongs to the estate of the old cattle-king, Michael Scott Buenaventura, and I represent the heir to that estate."

"Well, stranger, it's no quarrel of ours," said a gray-bearded miner, one of the representative men of the town. "Of course the alcalde ain't any more than any other man, and if he has got any private quarrels, why he ought to settle them, same as any other gentleman."

"Exactly! that is all I want!" Blake exclaimed. "And as far as I am concerned, I've done all that I ought to, in the premises. I've walked up to the man's door, called him a thief and a liar and dared him out to meet me; what more can I do?"

"Nothing, that's a fact," the miner admitted; "but I say, stranger, s'pose'n I go and see the alcalde, and tell him that you're hyer for a fight, and see what he's going to do about it?"

"That's a good idea; go it! I'm ready to meet him with any weapon he chooses, rifle, revolver or knife; and if he wants to make the thing interesting, and his gang are anxious to take a hand in the fun, why, my friends hyer will accommodate them."

"All right, I'll carry the message."

The old miner departed.

The alcalde had noticed the interview and guessed when he saw the miner approach the nature of the message which he brought.

The miner, old Captain Bull, as he was generally called, related the particulars of his interview with Blake.

The alcalde gave an indignant snort when he finished his recital.

"And am I to risk my life against that of any ruffianly fool who chooses to think that I have wronged him?" he demanded.

"But it's our law, you know, alcalde; every man has the right to a trial by battle."

"Yes, when the man proves that I have wronged him, which I hav'n't done, and as for his cock-and-bull story about the Black Men of Tejon, why that is all utter nonsense; the fellow must have got drunk and dreamed it; but I say, captain, is the Camp going to stand this sort of thing? Am I, the alcalde of the town, to be besieged in my own house and compelled to fight whether I want to or not? Why don't you sound an alarm—raise the boys and drive these fellows from the town!" demanded Black, imperiously.

"Well, really, alcalde, I don't believe that any of the boys are hankering after sich a job," the miner replied. "These cusses mean business, alcalde; they intend to force you to fight or know the reason why, and as far as I kin see, it's all a private quarrel, anyway."

"Oh, is it?" sneered Black, fearfully angry that his words had no influence; "and the town is going to let this ruffianly gambler rule it and do exactly as he likes?"

"But you can't expect the hull camp to fight your private battles for you!" the veteran expostulated.

"Well, you can go back to this fellow and tell him that I am intrenched hyer and I defy him and all his force to get me out of this Ranch!" the alcalde cried, defiantly.

"All right; I'll do just as you say, but they'll go for you, sure as shootin'!"

"And if they do I'll lay some of them on their backs in mighty short order," Black retorted ferociously.

The miner returned and delivered the defiance to Blake.

"Inside of an hour, I'll give him all the fight he wants, or I'm a Dutchman!" the Fresh declared.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

STORMING THE CASTLE.

With an ugly look upon his dark face the alcalde watched the miner return to the invaders with the defiant message which he bore.

"Do you think they will dare to attack us?" McKerr asked, anxiously. The merchant of Buenaventura had little relish for this sort of thing; years of luxury and of ease had unfitted him for participation in deadly encounters.

"Oh, yes, he will try it on beyond a doubt," Black answered, carelessly.

"And do you believe that we will be able to hold out against him?" McKerr was evidently doubtful on this point.

"With five determined men, well armed and good shots, just such fellows as I have hyer, I feel confident that I could hold the Ranch against fifty, and it is infernal scoundrel hasn't got more than ten with him, if he has that many."

The two were standing together at the window, out of ear-shot of the red who were grouped to-

by the other window, the nearest one to the bar.

"This fellow is a desperate and determined man," the merchant remarked, evidently ill at ease, "and wonderfully expert, too, with his weapons."

"Oh, don't be alarmed!" cried the alcalde, abruptly; "although he did whip me pretty bad up in the mountains, he can't repeat the operation here in the town. You must take into consideration the fact that he had all the advantage of position, and that he took me entirely by surprise, for I had no idea that he had eight or ten men at his back; but the tables are turned now. I am intrenched and he must attack. There is no way of gaining an entrance to the house except through the door or windows in the front, unless they take an ax and chop a hole in the side or back of the shanty, and as the Ranch is surrounded by open ground on all sides, they can't possibly approach without our seeing them. I'll post a man at one of the upper windows in the rear, and that will prevent a surprise in that quarter," and the alcalde at once proceeded to carry out this necessary measure, then returned to his former position.

"The game has not been so easy a one for us as we anticipated," the merchant suggested.

"No, on the contrary, we have only gained a single point. The girl who came so far to seek her fortune was destroyed, but her death seems only to have brought other claimants into the field, people that I never dreamed to exist."

"It is strange," the merchant admitted; "and, by the way, now that you recall the destruction of Sandy McAlpine's craft, do you remember the vision that you experienced that night when we kept watch upon the bluff?"

The face of the alcalde darkened and he shut his teeth firmly together for a moment, but answered:

"Yes, I remember it very well indeed."

"And that vision has come true, hasn't it? The man with the pale face dressed entirely in black, and who seemed to bring the chill airs of the north with him, was this dare-devil Fresh of Frisco?"

"Yes; and do you remember further that in my vision I connected him with the girl because when he first appeared to me, he bore a senseless female in his arms, and she was all dripping wet, just as if she had been plucked from the waves?"

The merchant was quick to catch the idea.

"You think, then, that as one part of the vision has come true the other may be correct also?"

"Why not?" the alcalde questioned; "we believed that Sandy McAlpine perished on that night, but he escaped to tell the story of the wreck, and why not she?"

"He is a strong man; she a weak woman—"

"They stand a terrible amount of hardship sometimes, and like a cat they seem to have nine lives. The strange girl, of whom I've told you—who came here and said she was the wife of Miguel Scott, who disappeared so suddenly and mysteriously, and apparently without any reason—do you know I begin to believe that she was this Barbara?"

"It seems almost impossible!" McKerr exclaimed.

"The most impossible things happen sometimes," the alcalde replied, "and in this matter wherein all the advantage appeared to be upon our side, fate itself seems to have worked for the other."

"Has the marvelous gift which you possess warned you at all of what is in store, in the future?"

"Yes, but only dimly and uncertain; never since early childhood and the spell began to grow upon me, has the sight been as clouded and uncertain; but the visions presage death—whether to myself or to another I know not; shrouded in a misty vapor a tall figure appears to me, wearing a plaid reversed and that always signifies death, you know, according to our Highland creed; but whether it is myself or another who is fated I cannot tell, for the gloom which enshrouds the figure is so dense that I am unable to discover by the checks of the plaid whether it is ours or another's."

The face of McKerr assumed a gloomy expression.

"If the figure wore the plaid, then it is pretty plain that it is either you or I," he observed.

"Oh, no; it may be this man Blake; he may be a Scotchman and entitled to wear the plaid, for all we know," the alcalde replied. "Blake, you know, is a good old Scotch-Irish name."

"If it is his own, which is doubtful," McKerr observed.

"I never thought of that."

While this conversation had been going on, neither one of the two had neglected to keep a watchful eye upon the movements of the Fresh and his men, who were congregated a little way up the street, right at the corner of a house which, in a measure, sheltered them from the observation of the men in the Ranch; and they had been busily engaged in conversation until now, evidently debating the best mode of attacking the Ranch; but now the conference apparently came to an end, for there was a decided movement; Blake and his men abruptly retreated behind the house and disappeared from sight.

The alcalde and his gang grasped their weapons; they felt that the tug of war was near at hand.

"They are coming for us, sure enough!" Stuart McKerr exclaimed, nervously. In truth, the merchant had little relish for this sort of thing, and a hundred times since the trouble commenced he had wished that he was safely back again in Buenaventura, and inwardly he swore to himself that, if he once got safely out of the scrape, not even the hidden treasures of old Michael Scott would tempt him to venture his precious person in the wild and lawless mountain region again.

But the alcalde was made of sterner stuff, and, although he had serious misgivings as to the issue of the fight, yet, man of blood and desperate deeds as he was, he did not shrink from the contest, but rather invited it; for he had fully determined that the end would only be reached when he or Blake had fallen, and, with the bulldog courage which was so conspicuous a part of his nature, he really cared very little whether he lived or died, if he could only succeed in compassing the death of the man who had had the boldness to brave his power and defy him to his very teeth right in his own stronghold.

"I believe that they really mean business!" the alcalde concluded, as he noticed that all the attacking force had disappeared. "They have either given

up the thing as a bad job, or else they are going to try some cunning trick upon us. I reckon that you and I had better go up-stairs," he observed, addressing McKerr. "And you," and he addressed the Mexican, "take command down here. Bar the door and plug 'em if they attempt to break in through the windows; but before they can do that they'll have to run the gantlet of our fire from the upper windows, and I reckon that we will drop a few of 'em on the way."

Then the two men proceeded up-stairs. The alcalde threw up the window, and as he did so, a well-aimed bullet whistled by him, passing within an inch of his head.

Despite his firm nerves and well-tryed courage, he dodged back; it had been a narrow miss.

The shot came from the interior of a small shanty, store and saloon combined, which was situated on the opposite side of the street, about a hundred yards from the Alcalde's Ranch. It was plain that the attacking force had selected the shanty as a cover for their operations.

"Are you hit?" questioned McKerr, in alarm.

"No, but it was a narrow squeak," Blake replied; "but a miss is as good as a mile, you know!"

Then the alcalde took the rude bunk in the room and braced it up, mattress and all, against the window.

"There, it will take a good charge of powder and a fine rifle to drive a ball through that," he observed, with a dark smile upon his stern features.

The bunk also afforded the beleaguered men a cover from whence they could look out and note, almost unobserved, the movements of the foe.

We say almost unobserved, for the alcalde was not wholly so, as was quickly proven, for he had hardly occupied his look-out five minutes before the quick crack of a rifle again rung out on the air, and the expert marksman put a ball in the window casement so near to the head of Blake that one of the splinters displaced by the ball struck him on the cheek.

An angry oath came from the lips of the alcalde; his rifle, cocked and ready, was in his hand, and eagerly he sought to gain a sight of the unknown who was displaying such excellent marksmanship.

"If I draw a bead on him once, I'll send him to blazes, kiting!" the enraged man cried.

But the expert rifleman was so skillfully ambushed that, with all his keenness of vision, Blake could not get a sight of him.

For some fifteen or twenty minutes nothing was done on either side, and the bystanders, who, at safe distances, were eagerly watching the fight, were just beginning to ventilate the opinion that, notwithstanding the threatening preparations, it wasn't going to be "much of a shower after all," when, all of a sudden, the attacking force opened a most terrific fire upon the Alcalde's Ranch, and dancing out from behind the shelter of the shanty seemed upon the point of charging Black's stronghold, pell-mell.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LIAR'S AID.

The alcalde's gang were fully prepared for action though, and at once opened a brisk fire upon the attackers and for a few minutes there was a lively exchange of shots, but very little damage done and the fire slackened.

"They do not dare to charge across the opening!" the alcalde exclaimed, in triumph. "I knew that I could hold the Ranch against them, and if they don't do better than this, I can hold it until the infernal region freezes over!"

But, hardly had the boast escaped his lips when there was a terrible commotion down-stairs.

There came a yell of triumph, a few quick shots, a rush of heavy footsteps and the sound of a struggle below.

It was plain, now, that the attack in front had been but a clever device to mask an advance in the rear, and while the besieged men had had their attention occupied by the marksmen, covered by the old shanty, another party had contrived, despite the sentinel posted to keep watch in the rear, to gain an entrance into the house.

And in order to explain how this had been accomplished we must go back a little.

The moment that Blake received the defiant message of the alcalde he prepared to attack the master of Tejon Camp in his very stronghold. He well realized that this would be no easy task, for, forced to the wall, Blake would make a desperate fight.

It was while debating how to wage the war that a new-comer appeared upon the scene—none other than the peon, Indian Jose, the Liar.

The old savage wandered about like an unquiet spirit, and his comings and goings could not be at all depended upon.

He grinned at Blake after the usual fashion of his race, ejaculated, "How!" then beckoned Blake apart from the rest, and in his peculiar way protested against an open attack upon the Alcalde's Ranch—which of course meant that the savage had a better plan.

"Out with it, red-skin, if ye've got an idea in yer noddle!" cried Blake.

Jose again grinned as he suggested that by using the secret underground passage leading from the old Indian mine in the mountains to the Alcalde's Ranch an entrance could be gained to the very heart of the stronghold and the defenders taken entirely by surprise.

Blake at once declared the plan to be a most excellent one, and the only thing difficult about it was to procure a guide who knew how to find the entrance to the old mountain mine, which the original delvers in the earth had concealed so carefully.

Jose immediately declared his willingness to act as a guide and significantly remarked that there was not a foot of the mine but was as well known to him, either in the dark or in the light, as his own hand, as the district and the mine had been the property of his tribe for a great number of years before the conquering white man had ever set foot in the Mohave valley.

Blake, eagerly accepting the offer, proceeded to put the plan at once to the practical test.

Four of his band he placed under the command of Sandy McAlpine, and they were instructed to keep the alcalde and his gang busy by threatening attack from the front, keeping themselves well covered during the operation so as not to expose the weakness of their force; and as the Indian stated that within twenty or thirty minutes at the latest

the attacking party would arrive at the Ranch, McAlpine was instructed that at that time he and his party were to make a strong demonstration, so as to fully occupy the attention of the besieged and thus render the surprise complete.

The orders were carried out to the letter. McAlpine himself was the skillful marksman who so excited the rage of the alcalde by his well-aimed shots, and if ever a man threw his heart into his work, the adventurer most surely did, for he was after revenge for his wrongs and panted for satisfaction for the crafty trick which strewed the bones of the Santa Maria along the Pacific strand and so nearly sent him to a watery grave.

With a yell and a cheer Blake and his men came rushing into the saloon.

"Throw down your arms or die!" the Fresh cried. But the ruffians, panic-stricken by the unexpected attack, and expecting to be instantly slaughtered, rushed in hot haste out through the door and fled up the street; at the same moment, too, the alcalde, comprehending that all chance of holding the Ranch was gone, and that safety could only be found in flight, pulled the bed away from the window and jumping through the casement leaped to the ground.

It was a device that deserved success, but as the alcalde leaped through the air, sharp and clear rung out a single rifle-shot.

Full of life and strength, a reckless, desperate man was the alcalde when he leaped through the window; but the mass that came heavily tumbling to the ground, was but flesh molded in the image of a man—carion clay, fit only for the worms or the funeral pyre.

Alex Black, the Alcalde of Tejon Camp, was dead; the strong man who had ruled the rough and turbulent spirits of the Mohave valley with a rod of iron had, by the agency of a little bit of lead, propelled by a few grains of powder, and directed by the hand of a man whom he, in his imperious way, had rudely trod upon, yielded up, in a second, the life so strong within his veins.

With the death of the alcalde the fight ceased, for Blake and his band disdained to strike at the panic-stricken ruffians fleeing in hot haste for their lives.

It had been an almost bloodless victory, thanks to the clever plan of Jose, the Liar.

The merchant, unnerved and affrighted, descended to the saloon, expecting to be harshly dealt with, but, to his surprise, he was quietly received by Blake, who referred him to the young Californian.

"You can settle with this gentleman," he remarked; "if he chooses to call you to an account we shall be obliged to take up the quarrel; otherwise you are free to depart as far as I am concerned."

"Step one side, please," said the young man, and when the merchant eagerly complied, trusting that he was going to get out of the hobble in which he found himself, the Californian made known his conditions.

"I represent Barbara Scott," he declared, much to the amazement of the merchant, "the girl whom you doomed to a most cruel death; now what do you propose to do to atone for that act?"

McKerr saw that he was fairly caught, and that, in order to escape from the trap in which he had unwittingly placed himself, it would be necessary to make a liberal offer. The alcalde was dead; upon the alcalde's shoulders, then, he could place all the blame, for the dead man could not very well deny it.

It was an ingenious idea, and the merchant put it in a very presentable form as he related how the alcalde had tempted him and how weakly he had yielded to the temptation, but he kept in his own breast the secret that he and the dead man were kindred.

He made an extremely fair offer; if the past was blotted out and his conduct forgotten, in the future he would do all in his power to aid the young heiress, not only to find the hidden treasure of the old cattle-king, but to recover the estates of her grandfather, which so many eager, lawless hands had clutched. As the merchant tersely explained, nearly every foot of Tejon Camp belonged to her, and the dead alcalde, in truth, had not the shadow of a claim to it. In fine, he would work for her interests to the best of his ability, and would accept for his services whatever recompense the heiress chose to bestow.

To this offer certainly no one could object, and the young Californian at once signified that he would accept it on behalf of Barbara Scott.

"And where is Miss Barbara?" the merchant inquired.

"She will be here to-night," was the reply.

McKerr refrained from asking any further questions, although he was eager to learn how the girl managed to escape the terrible death to which she had been consigned; but, situated as he was, he thought that it would hardly do to expose his curiosity.

The miners came gradually flocking into town, attracted by the sound of the firing, naturally surmising from the frequent discharges that a free fight of the "tallest" kind must be going on.

Great was the general astonishment when they beheld the dead body of the alcalde and learned what had transpired. And then there was a mystery, too, about the alcalde's death; no one seemed to know who had fired the shot which had laid low the once iron-willed master of Tejon Camp.

So great had been the excitement and confusion attending the struggle that the slayer had passed unnoticed.

Sandy McAlpine, though, had come forward and taken a good look at the fallen man, who had once dealt him so terrible a blow, then turned away with a fierce but satisfied look upon his bronzed face, and the chances are great that the adventurer could have spoken the name of the alcalde's slayer had he so willed.

To Blake, the Californian made known the agreement which had been entered into with the merchant of Buenaventura, and the Fresh at once declared that it was a good thing.

"He can render aid in this matter that no other man can, for he is well acquainted with the affair from the beginning, and after the lesson which he has received, there is hardly a doubt that he will be honest now," he remarked.

To the miners Blake explained why he had attacked the alcalde, showed them the secret trap-door in the Ranch, and the secret, underground passages, and although the dead man was not without friends,

yet the prowess of the Fresh and his backers had been so great that nothing openly was said. The alcalde had ruled by virtue of the strong arm; by a strong arm had he fallen; it was his fate, and now that he was dead the town of Tejon Camp really breathed more freely, for a stern ruler had been the dead chief.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.
THE LIAR'S FAITH.

The Fresh at once took possession of the hotel in the name of Miss Barbara Scott, and as he was so well backed no one dared to say nay.

When the shades of night began to gather around the Camp, the young Californian came to Blake and announced that he must ride forth to meet Miss Barbara and conduct her to the town.

Blake merely assented with a nod of the head, and the young man departed; but there was a curious smile upon his face as he looked after the mysterious stranger who had succeeded in kicking up such a row in the mining town.

The throng that night in the saloon of the Alcalde's Ranch was great, for like wild-fire the news of the fight and the tragic death of the alcalde had spread, and one and all flocked in to take a look at the scene of the encounter, and to hear from eyewitnesses the full particulars of the tragic affray.

The saloon looked the same as usual; everything was in full blast as on the night when we first introduced the reader to its mysteries, with the exception that the stalwart form of the alcalde no longer presided over the *monte* table.

The clock behind the bar pointed to the hour of nine and the hum of conversation mingled with the clinking of glasses resounded through the room when the front door of the saloon opened suddenly and a tall female figure, completely clad in black and heavily veiled, entered the apartment.

The conversation ceased; the clink of glass touching glass was heard no more; instead, a loud "hush!" sounded through the room and every eye was fixed upon the stranger. It had been generally rumored around that the heiress would arrive that night, but few expected to see her alone and unattended.

Then one rough fellow near the door took it upon himself to do the honors.

He pulled off his weather-beaten hat, cleared his voice with a husky "ahem," and said:

"Miss Barbara Scott, of Buenaventura, I take it, marm?"

"Yes, sir," responded the lady, in a clear, sweet, but strong and resolute voice.

And it was Barbara Scott, the orphan heiress, who had journeyed so far to grasp a fortune, but had so nearly found a grave instead.

"We're glad to see that you're alive, miss, and come to claim your own!" the rough fellow continued.

And then another, not to be outdone by the first, pulled off his hat and swung it over his head, crying out:

"Three cheers for Miss Scott, of Buenaventura!"

The cheers were given with a roar that made the old shanty ring; then Blake coming forward, introduced himself and informed the lady that the best apartment that the Ranch could boast had been assigned to her.

Not sorry to escape from the demonstrations of the miners, although they were prompted by the most kindly feeling, the lady followed Blake, who conducted her at once to her room.

"Where is the gentleman who went to bring you?" the Fresh naturally asked, after they had entered the apartment.

The lady turned and quietly removed her veil. Blake was struck by the marvelous resemblance to the young Californian.

"Ah, my bold young friend is your brother, then?" he observed, in the most innocent manner possible.

She smiled and fixed her brilliant black eyes full upon his face.

"Why do you attempt to deceive me?" she exclaimed. "You know full well who and what the young Californian was. Although I did not believe it at first yet now I am satisfied that you penetrated my disguise the very first time that we met in the room below."

"Oh, no; not quite so bad as that! I did not guess who and what you were until from the lips of Sandy McAlpine I heard the story of Barbara Scott."

"He recognized me at once; but then, of course, he had previously known me, but he had wit enough to keep my secret."

"You played your part so well that I would have defied almost any one to have discovered you unless they had been acquainted with you."

"Fortune willed that I should be well favored by nature and by circumstances, so that I could successfully assume such a disguise," she replied. "All my early life was spent at sea. My father was the master of a trading craft that plied in the Gulf of Mexico, and so it happened that I was used to all weathers and to almost every hardship, for in my reckless way I learned to take my 'trick' at the wheel as well as any sailor that ever took a tiller in hand; I could swim like a fish, and therefore, when the little craft of McAlpine was wrecked, I found myself in an element almost as natural to me as the land. It was a long swim and a dangerous one, for the surf beat on the coast with terrible fury, but I made the shore at last. I understood at once that I had been the victim of a terrible plot, and that, if I wished to baffle my enemies, I must let them believe that their scheme had succeeded, and that I had perished. When the light came I found some articles of male attire that had been washed ashore from the wreck. I discarded my womanly garments and attired myself in these, casting my clothes upon the body of the young sailor which I found high and dry upon the strand. I knew that the birds and beasts would soon make havoc of the remains, and if my enemies came to look for my body, when they found the bones of the sailor, with pieces of my garments near, they would be misled into believing that I had surely perished."

"And so it all happened, it appears."

"Yes; then, resolved to keep to my disguise, I set out to beg my way to this place, but the very first but at which I implored assistance was the home of the old peon. He was deeply steeped in liquor, but he saw the family resemblance at once and took me to be Miguel Scott, a son of my grandfather's whom he never heard of until then. I told him that I was

not Miguel Scott, but he insisted that I was, and so at last I resolved to humor the delusion, since it would do no harm. He supplied me with clothes, weapons, a horse, money, everything. Then I went to San Barbara, procured what articles I needed, and then came on here; you know the rest."

"At last you have triumphed."

"Yes; the secret, hidden treasure is mine; I have a clew to the hiding-place; the wealth is concealed in that very cavern where, with hot irons, the alcalde threatened to burn out our eyes."

"He was hot on the scent yet never guessed it!" Blake declared.

"Let us go at once and see if the treasure is still there; I am in a fever of impatience!"

"I will get a lantern."

Blake soon returned with this necessary tool for the work which they had in hand, and at once they proceeded to the underground region, whither they had been carried on that memorable night when the Black Men of Tejon had seized them for a prey.

Rapidly they threaded the narrow, subterranean way, and in a very short time arrived in the main cavern.

"There; it is concealed behind the rocky throne where the masked judge sat; the rock moves on a pivot—it is a natural rocky stone, but the force must be exerted in one particular place else it will defy the strength of a hundred men to move it a particle."

As they advanced eagerly to the stone a dark figure stepped out from the shadow of the wall and confronted them.

Strong of will and resolute as were both these seekers after fortune, yet the sudden apparition startled them.

"How?" came in guttural tones from the lips of the unknown, and they saw at once that it was the Indian, José El Embustero.

The Liar was faithful to his trust, and well it was that he was there, for, with that artfulness so natural to his race, he had blocked the rocking-stone with a small fragment of granite, so that it was impossible for any one, even though acquainted with the secret, to cause the stone to move.

With one of his stolid grins the savage told of his trick, and removing the obstacle caused the stone to rock aside, revealing a cavity wherein the hidden treasures of the old cattle-king were snugly bestowed just exactly as he had placed them long years before.

The wealth was there; and, more than the wealth—an old and yellow parchment which, at Barbara's request, Blake examined.

The parchment told a wonderful tale of a Lost City in Upper Arizona, somewhere near the Great Canyon of the Colorado, where golden nuggets lay piled in solid heaps, and wealth equal to the wildest dreams of the greatest miser that the world ever saw, was to be had for the mere taking, provided a man had wit enough to find the Lost City, strength enough to cope with the wild red Apache warriors whose territory must be entered, and worldly knowledge sufficient to laugh to scorn the vague, unsubstantial stories of the horrid shapes, demon shadows, the unquiet souls of the old-time denizens of the Lost City who were said to still haunt their former abode, and whose wrath was excited if strange footsteps trod upon their hallowed ground.

"You wished a chance to lead another and a better life!" the girl exclaimed. "Take this parchment, find the Lost City, and its treasure will make you independent forever, unless you prefer to stay and share my fortunes!"

"No, not a penny!" Blake replied, decidedly. "I will undertake the quest, but if I return alive, one favor I will ask at your hands."

"You have but to name it and it is yours!" she cried, extending her hand, which he grasped, ardently; "ask even for my life and it is yours!"

The treasure found and Barbara mistress of her own, our tale is told. We lay aside the pen, but not for long, for in a new field we must trace the fortunes of Jackson Blake, the "Fresh of Frisco."

THE END.

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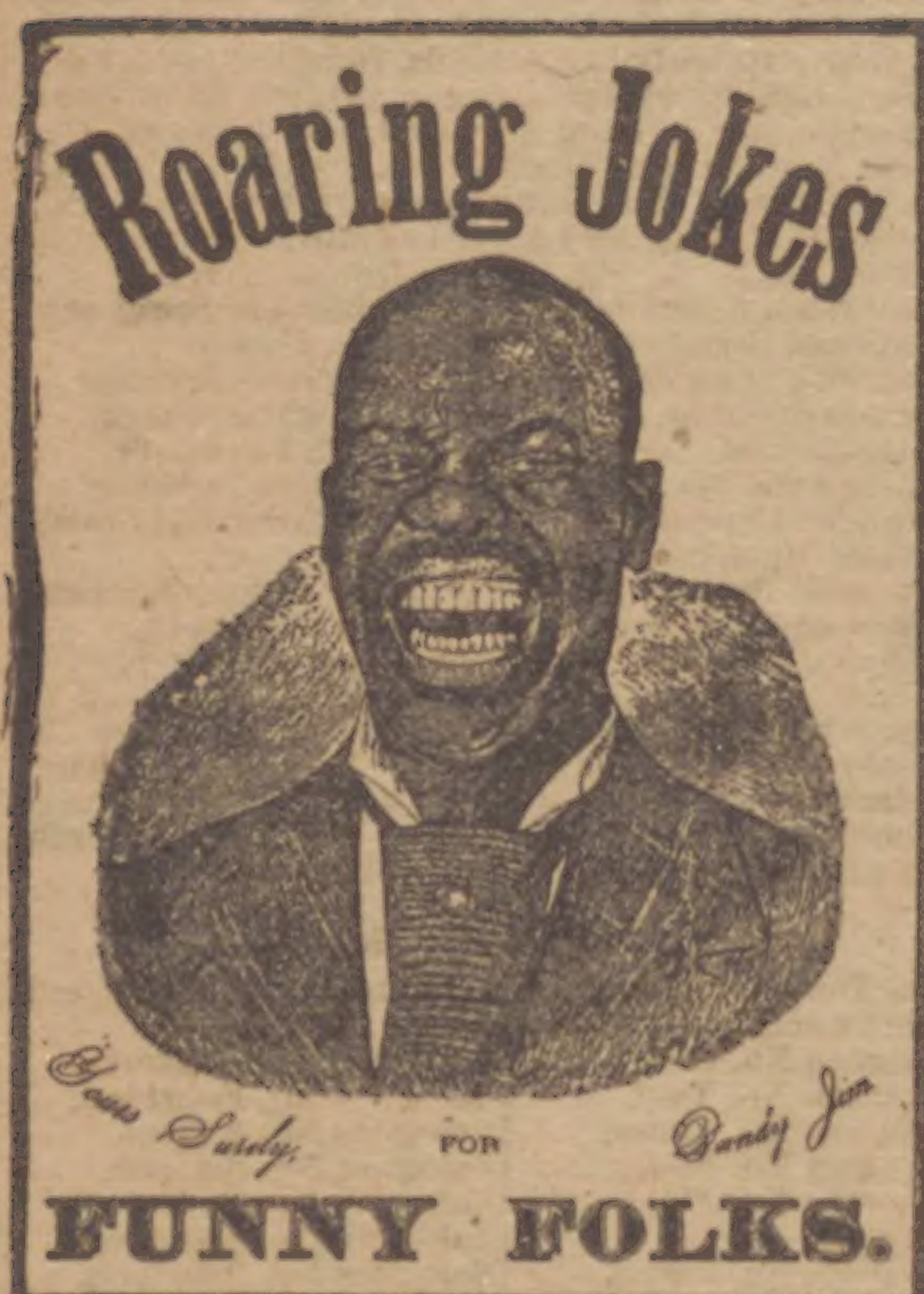
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